

ALFRED MYSTERY MAGAZINE HITCHCOCK

DECEMBER 2003

Ah, Rash Deceiver!

A writer celebrates
her last Halloween

By JOHN H. DIRCKX

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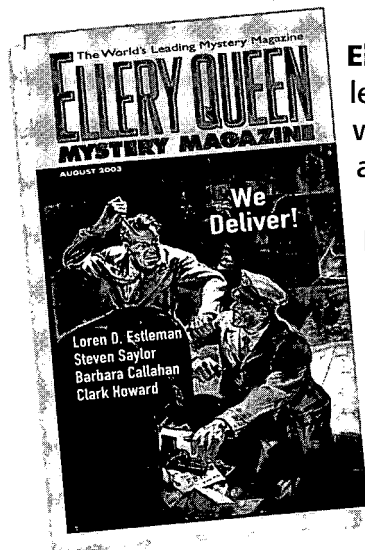


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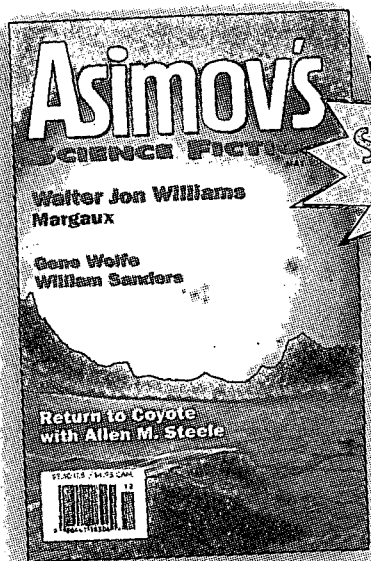
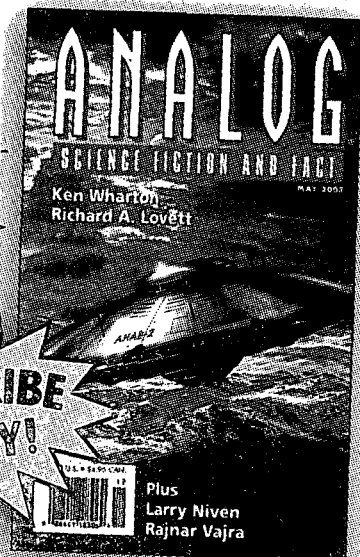
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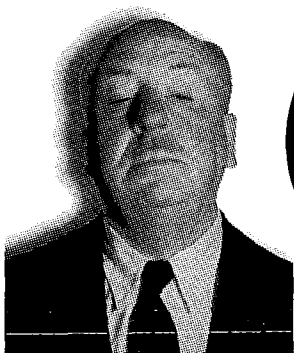
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

Viva Las Vegas!

Many of you will be reading this at Bouchercon 34 in Las Vegas. Naturally, we always look forward to this annual gathering of mystery fans, writers, booksellers, editors, and agents, but this year we have some particular reasons to be excited. Our friend and colleague Janet Hutchings, editor of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, is being honored at the convention for her many contributions to the field. Congratulations, Janet! Also, two AHMM stories are finalists for the Macavity Award: Diana Deverell's "Boot Scoot" (published last October), and Brendan DuBois's "An Empire's Reach" (November 2002). Best of luck to both! Other awards presented at Bouchercon include the Shamus (presented by the Private Eye Writers of America), the Barry (presented by Deadly Pleasures), and of course, the Anthony Awards, named for Anthony Boucher.

Two authors return to our pages this month after long absences. Percy Spurlark Parker is himself a resident of Las Vegas, as is his character P.I. Bull Benson; in "Stacked Deck," Benson is still mourning the loss of his friend and mentor, Sam Devlin, when he takes on a seemingly impossible case. Mr. Parker last appeared in AHMM in the January 1984 issue. Edward D. Hoch hardly needs introducing to mystery short fiction readers. A prolific story writer, he's had a tale in every issue of EQMM for the past thirty years. His "Walk with a Wizard" is our Mystery Classic this month; it first appeared in AHMM in July 1964. And we welcome to our pages this month Susan Fry; a former editor of *Speculations* magazine, her own speculative fiction has appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction* as well as other magazines and anthologies.

Over the past few months, we've initiated a number of changes at AHMM, and you'll notice another of these next month. The January/February issue will be the first of what will now be two annual double issues.

Finally, we've received sad news of the passing of David K. Harford on August 3, 2003. A native of Emporium, Pennsylvania, in the Allegheny mountains, Mr. Harford set many of his stories in that region. He also drew on his experience as a military police officer in Vietnam—his AHMM story "A Death on the Ho Chi Minh Trail" (March 1998) was selected for *The Best American Mystery Stories* 1999, edited by Ed McBain and Otto Penzler.

PEAT

SUSAN FRY

I watched Sergeant Bonfield kneel next to the body of the red-headed woman. She'd been pulled from the moors just that morning, dug up by a peat-slicing machine. A worker had seen the flash of red hair as the body fell to the ground. Being a man of good sense, he'd stopped the machine and called us.

It was a sunny day, almost hot for Yorkshire, and the smell of the peat bog was thick and rich around us, a little like mold mixed with mud, with something darker underneath, like blood.

"We should call forensics," I said.

"It's Fiona Innes," Bonfield said. Then he cursed and stood up.

"Who's Fiona Innes?" I asked.

Bonfield didn't answer. He'd done that quite a bit since I'd joined the department a fortnight before. It was his way of showing he resented being assigned as my partner. I suppose I couldn't blame him. He was Eggleston born and bred, and he'd gotten stuck with me, Mitra Mohanraj, the outsider—an Indian, a woman, and a Londoner. But his silences grated on me. They were almost enough to make me wish I'd stayed in London and married some nice boy from Mumbai my mother picked out for me. Like my sister had.

I decided I could manage with a bit of silence.

"Who's Fiona Innes?" This time 'round I made my voice as loud and deep as I could to show him I couldn't be trifled with.

"She disappeared two years ago. I worked her case," Bonfield said, his voice flat. "I knew he did it, the bastard." He kicked at the moist soil with his feet, like an angry child.

"Who?"

"Her husband," he said. "George Innes. He beat her. The neighbors heard them going at it the day she disappeared—screaming and smashing the crockery to bits. One of the neighbors intervened, but she left when things seemed to quieten down. Innes claimed Fiona decided to trot along to her sister in Bristol. But the sister said Fiona never made it."

I looked at the body. I was surprised that Bonfield was able to identify it. It looked like some strange creature molded out of mud, like one of the Hindu demons my mother had given me nightmares about as a child. The arms and legs were drawn into a fetal position, and the skin was so dark and wrinkled I couldn't tell where the peat began and the body ended. The face was pushed into an unrecognizable grimace by the weight of the peat. Only the long mane of hair looked female. Underneath the mud, it was a bright flame red.

"Are you sure it's her?"

Bonfield frowned, his pale skin flushing with anger. "Of course I'm bloody well sure." His voice rose. "The red hair, even the leather skirt she was wearing when she vanished." He pointed to tatters of material around the woman's thighs.

I imagined a man tearing at the skirt, and I swallowed. The woman's skin, after two years in the bog, had darkened to exactly the same color as mine. The same color as my sister's. A familiar fear boiled in my stomach, and I shivered.

Sergeant Bonfield bent and picked up a black clot of peat. "Bloody marvelous source of fuel, peat. My da' was thirty years a peat cutter, until his death. You need strength to work the machines. You need to be a real man." He bit off the last words, as if they weren't the compliment they seemed. Then he clamped his mouth shut, clearly surprised he'd spoken.

"We better call forensics," I said, again.

"Right." He threw the peat across the field as if trying to kill something with it.

Bonfield drove too quickly back to the village. In Eggleston, the roads were so narrow you had

The body looked like some strange creature molded out of mud, like one of the Hindu demons.

to beep before a turn, hoping that whoever was coming at you from the other side would hear and pull over before smashing into you. But I didn't dare criticize our speed. Bonfield's mouth was set in a grim line, and his shoulders seemed to take up most of the space in the small car. I shifted toward the window. I'd be average height in India, but I was about the size of a twelve-year-old English girl. Big men made me uncomfortable, even after self-defense classes, even after joining the force.

I wondered why Bonfield was so angry about Fiona Innes's

murder. Perhaps he'd known her before her death. Perhaps he'd even been in love with her. Or perhaps he just couldn't stand failing at a case. I didn't know him well enough to reason it out. I didn't know him at all.

A muddy sheep wandered into the road in front of us, and Bonfield swerved to miss it. Normally, we'd stop and herd it off—sheep strikes were a common cause of smash-ups—but Bonfield didn't even pause.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

"Because, according to the law, we need proof before . . ."

Without a word, Bonfield stopped in front of a square, red brick house, slammed down the hand brake, and got out of the car. I said a few words my mother would have frowned at, then followed.

As Bonfield rang Innes's bell, I saw the curtain twitch in the window of the house next door. A woman in red peered out at us. Then Innes opened his door, and the neighbor pulled her curtain shut.

Innes wore a blue rugby jersey with the words "Eggleston Vikings" across the front in gold. The shirt was tight enough to show off his hard, sinewy bands of muscle, the type you get from running around on a field, not from lifting weights in a gym. He was about the same age as Bonfield, and they had the same floppy blond hair and blue-gray eyes. That's what generations of inbreeding will do to a village. But Innes was more lean and film-star glam than Bonfield. I felt disappointed in Bonfield, as if he'd somehow let me down.

"Sergeant." Innes blinked at Bonfield, then swallowed. "Have you . . . discovered anything?" I thought he actually sounded hopeful, but I also knew that domestic abusers were the best liars in the world.

Bonfield froze. I could tell he hadn't thought any further than this moment, standing toe-to-toe with Innes. I wondered again why Innes made him so angry.

I cleared my throat. "Good afternoon." I smiled, brightly. "I'm Sergeant Mitra Mohanraj. We're reviewing unsolved cases, and as I'm new to the department, I was hoping I could ask you some questions. I know it must be difficult for you, but . . ."

Bonfield shot me a look I could have sworn was gratitude.

Innes frowned down at me. He was shorter than Bonfield, but still big enough to make me nervous.

"You're with the police? But you're a Paki," he said.

Bonfield shot me another look. This one I could have sworn was an apology.

I made myself smile again. After all, I was the only person of Indian descent I'd yet seen in Eggleston. When the villagers looked at me, their first thought was probably "curry." I hated to admit there was some basis for this—my parents owned an Indian restaurant on Tottenham Court Road. They'd wanted me to get married and work in the restaurant, like my sister had before her death. They still hadn't forgiven me for joining the police. Then again, I hadn't forgiven them for a lot of things, either.

"I'm as English as you are," I said. "I grew up in London."

"Ah. Well, please come in."

I wondered if he would have let me in if I'd spent my childhood in India, as my sister had. She'd been ten years older than I was. She and my parents had lived as if they expected to step outside our front door and still be in India.

They'd had soft, sing-song accents, and they'd weaved their heads from side to side with their words. Sometimes they'd slipped up and said "yaar."

My voice and my outlook had always been pure, practical London. After my sister's death, I'd even cut my waist-length hair. My mother felt like I'd rejected her by doing that, and perhaps she was right. She said I wasn't pretty with a "boy's cut." But the masses of heavy, curly hair had overwhelmed my face, which I thought was pretty enough on its own. Short hair was liberating. I didn't have to spend hours drying and braiding it. Like a man, I could wash it, run my fingers through it a few times to tousle the curls, and get going.

Innes's house was surprisingly neat. A lace tablecloth lay over the large dining room table, immaculate except for a carton of cigarettes at one end. The china in the walnut cabinet gleamed, dust free, and the room smelled of lemon polish. Out the back window I saw a tidy square of green grass bordered by some cheerful red-colored flowers. They swayed in the breeze, waving at me like little hands. Only a few bushes separated Innes's yard from that of the woman who had peered out at us, and I could see flashes of red in the gaps between them, as if she had the same flowers in her garden, too. Innes must have had excellent maids and gardeners, or else he was an unusual bachelor.

The photographs covering the walls—Innes during various sporting matches—were also sparkling clean.

"You must be a brilliant rugby player," I said, pouring a full pint of admiration into my voice.

"I'm not bad," he said eagerly. "Won first place last year." He pointed at the biggest photograph. The Eggleston Vikings, mud-

splattered, mouths open in triumphal howls, piled on top of Innes as if trying to kill him. They looked like some primitive tribe in the midst of a terrible sacrifice. Innes held a gold-colored trophy up between the flying clots of mud, smiling triumphantly. I thought about Bonfield's peat and his words, "It takes a real man."

As if he sensed my inward shudder, Innes said, anxiously, "My mates are good un's, they are. You'd think they would've thought less of me, but they didn't."

"Less of you?" I asked.

"For being walked out on. But some of them have lost wives, too."

I shuddered again at the possible implications of that. I wondered if Innes's mates would have thought better of him for beating his wife to death.

Then I noticed another picture, one placed so inconspicuously it was almost hidden by the door. I bent over to get a closer look. Fiona Innes had been a beautiful woman. In the picture, the red hair I'd seen covered with mud that morning flowed in bright curls to her waist. Her features were strong, even striking—a well-cut nose and high cheekbones. She'd been full-figured, with ample breasts, and I was suddenly furious to think she'd been reduced to the sticklike, curled-up figure in the mud.

"Yes, that's Fi," Innes said. His bottom lip drooped sorrowfully, and his eyes opened wide, as if he were trying not to cry.

I noticed something odd. This picture, and this picture only, was covered in dust. Innes noticed the dust, too, because he heaved forth a great sigh and ran his finger slowly across Fiona's face, leaving a bright streak behind. It was a strangely tender gesture. I looked at him, and just for an instant I actually believed he was inconsolable at her disappearance.

"We fought like the devil," he said, "but we loved each other."

Behind me, Bonfield coughed.

Domestic abusers usually claimed to love their wives. Of course, that didn't stop them from striking out the next time she burned a dinner, or wore a sari he didn't like, or wanted to go out, even just to visit her sister. It didn't stop the insults from escalating into blows, into ripped clothing, into a woman dragging herself toward the door, blood from her broken nose splattering the linoleum . . .

The back door rattled, and I jumped.

Innes snatched his finger away from the picture and walked quickly over to the dining table, as if he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't. He swept the cigarettes into the drawer.

A woman strode into the room as if she were used to having free

run of Innes's house. She carried a plastic shopping bag covered with yellow sunflowers, and her red dress swirled around her slender calves. It was the woman from next door. She'd come through the garden instead of the front door, implying she was sure of her welcome. She'd probably come out of curiosity, to see what we wanted with Innes. She wasn't as beautiful as Fiona had been, but she was pretty enough.

She looked me up and down, the universal glance of a woman sizing another woman up as potential competition. I couldn't help feeling a bit flattered when she frowned.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know you had visitors, George." She put the bag on the table, and an apple rolled out. I suddenly understood why Innes's house was so clean. I also understood why Fiona's picture was dusty. I was surprised the woman hadn't broken it yet "by accident."

But this woman didn't look like a smoker.

"This is Mabel Farnton. She lives next door," Innes said, speaking too quickly. "Mabel, the police are here to look up cold cases."

"Perhaps you could help," I said.

Mabel Farnton sighed. "You know everything already. I stopped by, George and Fi were fighting, and I persuaded Georgie to go to bed. Fiona and I had a cuppa downstairs in the kitchen, and she decided to go to Bristol to stay with her sister."

"To get away from her husband?" I asked.

Mabel Farnton hesitated, then glanced at Innes. He looked away, as if ashamed, and she nodded, slowly. I couldn't blame her for her hesitation. It must be difficult to know that a man you fancied beat his wife.

"Did you see her go?"

She shook her head. "I helped her pack—just enough for a fortnight—but I left before she did."

Bonfield cleared his throat as if he'd just thought of something. "How did you pack up without waking Innes?"

"I'd put him down to bed," she said. "It was at the other end of the house. He wouldn't have heard a thing."

"I didn't," Innes said. He held his hands out to us, palms up. It was a boyish, helpless gesture at odds with the ropes of muscle outlined through his shirt. "I didn't hear a thing. I would've stopped Fi going if I had."

"And how exactly would you have done that?" Bonfield asked.

Innes looked at Mabel, his face as blank as a child's.

Mabel briefly closed her eyes. I wondered what was more painful to her—thinking Innes had killed Fiona, or thinking he still

loved her. "You'd better speak with his solicitor about anything else," she said, firmly.

As we left, the door of the house across the street opened. It was a small house, and one that badly needed paint. It was the kind of house that a neighbor like Mabel Farnton might complain about. A woman leaned against the doorway, pulled out a cigarette, and stared at us.

Bonfield cursed under his breath.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Guenevere Stoker." Bonfield hesitated, as if he didn't want anything to do with the neighbor, even though she was a potential witness. I was about to prod him on, but then he finally raised one hand in a half wave and led me over to her.

"Hallo, Miss Stoker," he said.

The woman briefly ran her eyes over me, then smiled at Bonfield as if he were much more interesting than I. She was prettier than Mabel Farnton, but more common-looking. Her blonde hair came from a bottle—or, judging from the jagged, multicolored streaks, several bottles. Her lips were a little too full, her blue eyes a little too sleepy for what my mother called "dacency." She wore a faded, light blue blouse over dark blue poly pants. A yellow patch over one of her largish breasts read, "Merrie Maids."

"Got a light, then, Sergeant?"

To my surprise, Bonfield produced a lighter. I hadn't known he smoked. He certainly didn't smell of cigarettes, the way this woman did—stale cigarette smoke and even more stale perfume. She pulled his hand close to her mouth until her cigarette glowed. Her fingers were red and rough looking, with a blister on her thumb. I saw Bonfield look at her breasts, as if he couldn't help it. Then he looked away.

Guenevere frowned and put her hand on his arm to get his attention again. "Still after poor Georgie for his wife?"

"Just routine," I answered for Bonfield. "Can you tell us what you saw that night?"

She shrugged. "What I told last time. Heard the row begin around nine o'clock, after I got back from my shift. They weren't half making a noise! Louder than the telly. Things smashing, her screeching. Don't blame him, really."

I felt a chill at the back of my spine. "Don't blame him for what?"

"Getting fed up. Fiona could be a right bitch. Men don't like it

when you criticize them. And what he did for her . . ." She closed her eyes and took a long, slow drag from her cigarette. In the afternoon sunlight, I could see how her face powder had settled into the cracks around her eyes. She was pretty now, but she wouldn't be in ten years.

"And what was that?"

She opened her eyes now, wide, and looked at me in surprise. "The house," she said. "He has a good job, Georgie does. Kept her like a queen. Wouldn't mind some of that myself." She dropped her cigarette, even though it was nearly unused, and ground it into the pathway. The collar of her uniform slipped open, and I saw that underneath she wore a bright turquoise bra. I felt a sudden stab of pity for her—her drab job and house obviously didn't suit her. But to look to a man like George Innes for salvation?

Guenevere turned to look at George Innes's house, and for a minute I saw it through her eyes—wealthy and comfortable. "That cow Mabel still in there?" The corners of her mouth turned down.

I nodded.

"Thinks she's special, she does. Thinks he fancies her. She doesn't know she's not the only one what takes care of him. And not the only one he takes care of." The comment was aimed at Bonfield, as if to make him jealous. But her sudden smile made her look happy, nearly young. I remembered the cigarettes Innes had jumped to hide when Mabel came in.

As if she'd revealed too much about herself, Guenevere snapped her smile off and turned back to Sergeant Bonfield. She looked him up and down again. "There's nothing wrong with a big, strong man. He didn't do anything to Fiona. At least, not anything she didn't deserve."

"Makes me want to be sick," Bonfield said, as he shut the car door. He looked over his shoulder at Guenevere's house, then grimaced and started the car.

I wanted to be sick, too. "Two women after Innes, even knowing what he did. He's a right bastard," I said.

"You think so?" Bonfield asked, pulling the car away from the curb.

There was a strange note in his voice, a challenging note. I looked at him in surprise. He wouldn't look back at me.

"Yes, that's what I think."

"Because you seemed pretty taken with him back there, when he blinked his big pretties at you and gave his 'we fought but we loved each other' speech."

I stared at him. "That's not true."

"Domestic abusers can look just like anyone else. They can even look like film stars."

I opened my mouth, then sighed. Bonfield had read my mind about Innes's looks. He was more perceptive than I'd thought. "I have to admit he was pretty convincing. No wonder he was never convicted."

"He wasn't even brought to trial. There was no body. Until now." He glanced at me and smiled. The corners of his eyes crinkled, and for a minute he looked just as handsome as Innes. But then he frowned again. "We better keep an eye on that Mabel Farnton, for her own sake. I'd hate to have another person connected to Innes *disappear*. She doesn't know what she's gotten herself into." He grimaced again. "And little Miss Guenevere Stoker, too. Though she doesn't seem to care."

I looked out the window. "Mabel Farnton actually saw Fiona Innes the night of the argument. Fiona must have been quite battered and bruised. To want to be with a man after that . . ."

I closed my eyes. I remembered my mother mending my sister's ripped, bloodstained saris and scolding her for being careless. I remembered my sister lifting a heavy tray into the restaurant oven, her sleeves sliding back over bruised arms. I remember my father turning away, saying nothing.

To my mind, that made them guilty, too.

Like Mabel Farnton?

I shook my head and opened my eyes. "I'm not sure that Mabel Farnton is all sweetness and light. She lied when she said she didn't know we were there. I saw her peering out at us from behind her window when we arrived."

"Interesting," Bonfield said, but I could tell he wasn't listening. His fingers tapped on the steering wheel as if he were scolding someone I couldn't see. I wondered what he was thinking about. I spoke more loudly.

"And do you remember that phrase she used about Innes? She said, 'I put him down to bed.' That's a phrase for sick children, not vicious brutes."

Bonfield actually snorted. "You think she helped him kill Fiona?"

I shrugged. I hadn't yet reasoned it out, and so I spoke slowly, in time with my thoughts. "When she came in, Innes jumped away from the picture of Fiona. Bullies don't cringe like that. They like to make other people cringe. Mabel Farnton may be small and female, but she's no weakling." I thought for another minute. "There's Guenevere, too."

This time, Bonfield laughed out loud.

"She may have been after Innes for a long time," I protested. "And if she thought she'd stand a chance with Fiona out of the way . . ."

"George Innes is a monster." Bonfield spaced the words out, slowly and clearly, as if he thought I wouldn't understand him otherwise. "Mabel Farnton and Guenevere Stoker are just bloody silly women." His tone implied that I was, too. Then he shut his mouth and sat in his familiar, glacial silence until we parked at the police station.

Was he right? Was I being fooled by Innes's act, too?

"Let's see what forensics tells us," I said.

"No bloody sodding way," Bonfield said. He stumbled over to a flimsy plastic chair in the corner of the postmortem room. It creaked as he sank into it.

"Yes," said Dr. Spafford, the pathologist. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, and all that." She looked at Bonfield anxiously. In a stage whisper, she asked me, "Do you think he needs some tea?"

Dr. Spafford looked disconcertingly like some country laird's grandmother. She had bright blue eyes and white hair set in perfect ladies-luncheon curls. She kept a teapot near the cadaver fridge, and translucent china cups and saucers on the same shelf with her medical books. Her scrubs were always perfectly ironed, and she could make a "Y" incision through a corpse's sternum in ten seconds, handling the scalpel like a lumberjack.

"He was sure it was Fiona Innes," I said.

Dr. Spafford smiled sweetly from behind her own plastic shield. "Not unless Fiona Innes lived two thousand years ago."

I looked at Sergeant Bonfield. I wanted to say, "I told you it might not be her," but I kept my mouth shut.

Dr. Spafford chirped on, clearly fascinated by what she'd found. "Ancient bodies get pulled out of bogs all the time—most of them in Denmark and Holland, but England does have its fair share. This is the first I've heard of here." She gestured at the body lying on the table. The woman who was not Fiona Innes had been placed exactly the same way I'd seen her that morning, doubled up in the fetal position. Her eyes were closed, and even her eyelids were brown and wrinkled.

"Peat is a marvelous preservative," Dr. Spafford said. "It actually tans the skin, like we tan leather. That's why the skirt survived so well." She carefully lifted one shredded flap of the material.

I looked away. I felt, somehow, like I was watching the woman be violated.

Dr. Spafford noticed my movement and misinterpreted it. "You're quite right," she said. "I shouldn't touch it. I'm not qualified as an archeologist. We're shipping it out this afternoon, to the Institute in London."

I also didn't like the way she called the woman "it."

Bonfield mumbled something.

"I'm sorry?" Dr. Spafford said.

"But what about her red hair?" He pinched his lips together, and I realized he was furious. I hoped it was with himself and not with me.

Dr. Spafford didn't seem to notice. "Oh, that's fascinating, too. It probably wasn't red originally. Most people who lived here during that era were probably blonde. The tannins in the peat interact with light hair, producing that lovely red color. Hair fibers are extremely durable."

"How did she die?" I asked.

Dr. Spafford frowned. "I can't say exactly, of course. You'd need an expert. But from the marks around the neck, I'd say she was garroted. That's the most common cause of death for these bodies. They're often young girls or boys, sacrificial victims, perhaps. I'd say she was about fifteen."

She beamed at us, but neither Bonfield nor I smiled back. For the first time, Dr. Spafford seemed to notice we weren't as intellectually stimulated as she was. She cleared her throat. "Well, why don't I leave you alone here for a bit? I have to get the body ready for transport."

The room was silent when she left. I looked across the girl's body at Bonfield.

"Aren't you taking this a bit personally?" I said.

"None of your concern," he said.

"It is. I'm your partner."

He looked away. "I just don't like it when a husband beats his wife."

"Neither do I," I said. I looked at the girl's body again. Her tanned skin swirled around her bones, and the leather swirled around her skin. It reminded me of finding my sister's body, surrounded by a tornado of blood and the unwound silk of her yellow sari. She'd been struggling to get to the door. My brother-in-law jumped a plane to India, and India refused to extradite him because he claimed my sister had been unfaithful. My parents chose to believe him.

"So what happened to Fiona Innes, then?" I knew I sounded belligerent, unfeminine, but I didn't care. "Are you just going to give up on her?"

"She's probably living happy and well in Bristol." Bonfield stared at the wall, his eyes glassy.

"I don't think so. There was something odd about Innes and Mabel Farnton," I said, slowly. "I have an idea. This girl's murderer will never be found. But perhaps she could help us find Fiona Innes."

"And how exactly could she do that?" Bonfield's voice was sarcastic, but he sat up straighter.

"Let's have Mabel Farnton and George Innes in to have a look at her."

"But she's not Fiona."

"They don't know that."

I led George Innes into the autopsy room. His face was already pale, as if he'd sensed some bad news from our phone call. But when he saw the woman laid out on the table, he sagged against me for support. Against me, a woman who didn't even reach his shoulder.

"Fi!" he said, "Fi! Oh, no." I gently helped him to the same plastic chair Bonfield had used, then stood back, worried he'd topple over. But he just sat there, sobbing, staring at the woman, not even bothering to wipe his tears away. He looked like an overgrown child, not a man. "Oh, what happened to her?" Then he turned on Mabel Farnton, in a fury. "You said she'd left. You said she'd gone away."

I glanced at Mabel. Her reaction to the woman was very different. She stood as still as a stone, staring at the table.

For a minute, I was worried she wasn't going to say anything. But then she looked at Innes, and her expression softened, as if she couldn't bear to see him in pain, even for minute. "Georgie," she said, gently. "Georgie, don't cry. It's not her."

"It looks like her," he sobbed.

"I know," she said. She went over and knelt next to him, so their faces were on the same level. Her red skirt spread out around her on the floor like the petals of a flower. "But it's not."

"What makes you think that?" Bonfield asked.

Her eyes narrowed, and her upper lip lifted in what looked like a snarl. "You're just trying to trick us," she said. She smoothed her skirt with the unconscious gesture of a well-groomed woman.

I remembered the red flowers in Innes's garden—and the same

red flowers in Mabel's. That's when I knew. "Because you've been at home all day, right?" I said. "Is that how you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're a small woman, like me. I'm strong, and even I couldn't carry someone Fiona Innes's size very far. Probably no farther than next door. You could have chopped her up and transported her somewhere in your car, but from the state of Innes's house, you're a neat person, aren't you? I can't quite see your doing that. So that leaves your back garden—with the convenient gaps in the hedge. You know we hadn't been digging around there, so you know this is not Fiona."

Her eyes were enormous now, her mouth a pinched line. She glanced at Innes.

Innes stopped sobbing. "It's not Fi?"

I shook my head. "No, Mr. Innes. But we're sending our officers around to Miss Farnton's house now, and I think they'll find her there."

"What?" He looked at Mabel Farnton in horror. "What did you do?"

"Nothing, Georgie, nothing!" Mabel Farnton tried to put her arms around him, but he squirmed away from her.

"You're lying! You said you would never lie to me. You said you'd protect me."

"Georgie, I did. You must realize that. That's why . . ." Then she looked at us, as if we would understand even if Innes didn't. "He was in danger. I couldn't let anything happen to him."

"You saved him from beating her to death?" Bonfield's laugh was dry.

Slowly, Mabel Farnton stood up. "No. You don't understand. George wasn't beating Fiona. Fiona beat George."

"No!" Innes struggled to his feet.

"Yes, George. You wouldn't raise a hand back to her. Even that last night." Her voice quavered, and her eyes filled with tears. "And you still loved her. That's what I don't understand. You love her even now."

"How did you do it?" I asked.

"Frying pan," she said. "The weapon she often used on Georgie. I got up to get her another cup of tea and . . ." She swallowed. "I managed to stop her before she'd done anything to him that night. But you should have seen him the times before—she blacked his eye, gave him bruises up and down his arms . . . look at that scar on his forehead!" She traced a pale, jagged streak with one finger as tenderly as Innes had touched Fiona's photo. But Innes jerked away.

"And no one ever wondered what was going on?" Bonfield asked.

I laughed, though my laughter had a tinny ring.

Bonfield looked at me in surprise.

"Rugby," I said. "He told everyone he'd been injured at rugby."

"Bloody hell," Bonfield said. He looked at Innes with contempt. "You let everyone think you beat her?"

Innes stood up straighter. "I had to, didn't I? Otherwise they all would have looked at me the way you're doing now. Like I'm no kind of man at all."

Bonfield's lips twitched, as if he couldn't decide whether to laugh or frown. "They?"

"My mates."

"Bloody hell," Bonfield said again.

I called in a couple of officers, and they took Mabel Farnton and George Innes. Bonfield and I stood in the autopsy room, alone, looking down at the ancient, yet horribly young body on the table.

"Did you know Mabel Farnton did it?" Bonfield asked me.

I shook my head. "I knew something was wrong. Innes didn't act like . . . like men I'd seen in similar situations. But I thought he'd accidentally killed Fiona, and that Mabel Farnton had helped him dispose of the body."

Bonfield opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. "I'm glad you had them come in. I'm glad we've gotten the truth, even if it wasn't what I thought it was. I hoped he'd done it, you see, and that I could catch him at it." He hesitated. "Ah, you wouldn't understand."

"My sister's husband killed her when I was fifteen." The words were out of my mouth before I knew I was going to say them. I hadn't said it out loud since the police had given up on extradition. I hadn't spoken about it with my parents, or with my friends, or with anyone. So why had I told Bonfield?

"Ah." Bonfield stared at the girl's body on the table. He dug his toe into the tile floor as if he was about to say something completely unimportant. "My da' drank. And my mum . . . he . . ."

"Care to have a talk about it?" I asked.

Bonfield took a deep breath. "No," he said. He turned, slowly, and walked away. As he reached the doorway, he put one hand up against the frame and hesitated, just for a moment. Then he stepped forward and was gone. 🐦

SNAKE IN THE SWEETGRASS

ROBERT LOPRESTI

I can't remember what state we're in.

We're near home; I can smell that much. But are we in Kentucky or Tennessee or even West Virginia?

Don't know.

If I asked Mac he'd shake that long mop of hair and say: "I've told you ten times, old man. Now, shut up and don't let anyone else know how senile you are or they'll send us all home."

Fuzzy would tell me, but he'd wear that sad smile and talk to me like I was five years old. That's even worse than Mac's bad manners and blasphemy.

I know this is the Summer Mountain Folk Festival, 'cause it says so on the fancy banners hanging everywhere. Wish they put the name of the state on 'em, too.

I was studying on that today while we were playing "Yellow Barber." I suppose I got so worried about geography I forgot to bow at all.

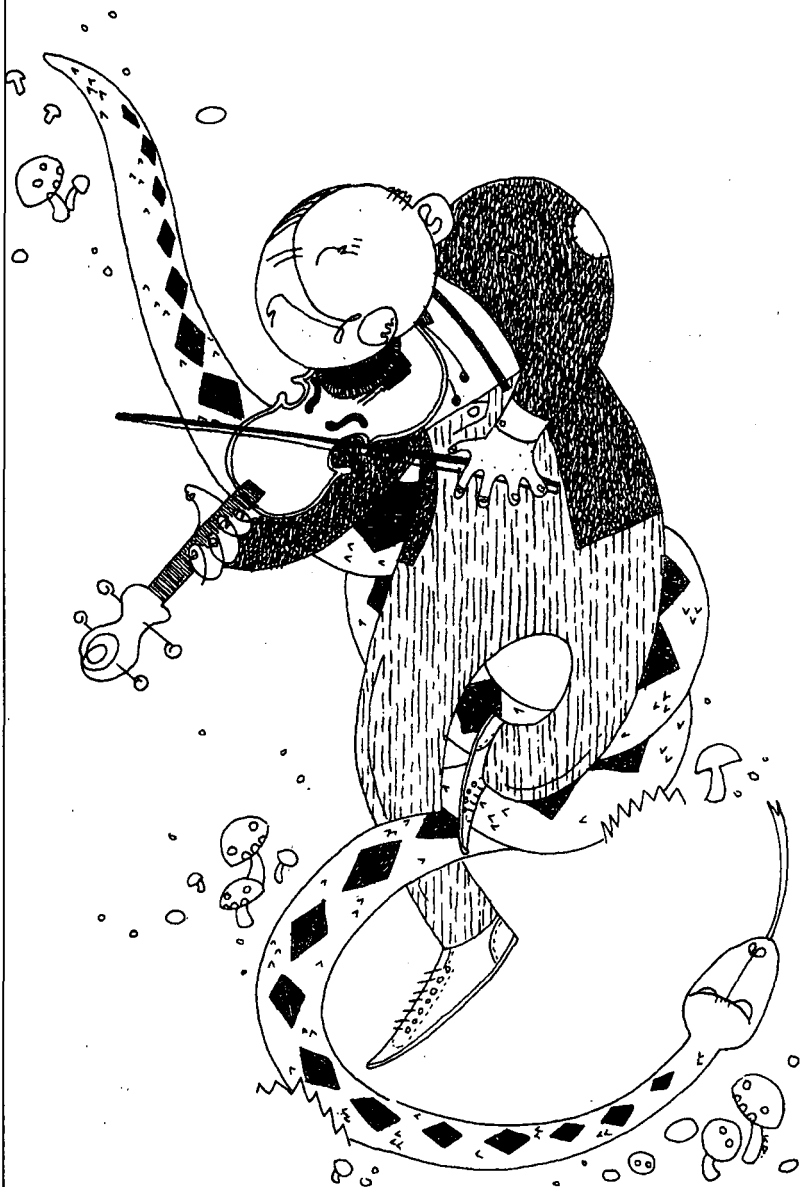
Fuzzy quit picking and Mac cursed. That woke me up and I started in again.

We got through the next tune okay and I began to perk up. That's when I saw Livy. She was sitting in the front row with a big smile on her face, looking every bit as sweet as the day I met her. Yes sir. Yes sir.

When Mac was introducing "The Prettiest Gal in the County" I stepped up to a microphone. I said, "I want to dedicate this one to Livy."

"Livy was Cleve's late wife," Fuzzy told the crowd. "They were married for forty-three years. Isn't that something?"

Everybody clapped, but I just stared at him. Livy dead? I looked back at the audience and she was gone. I was so surprised I fetched a few sour notes and Mac glared at me over his banjo.



Sometimes I wonder if I can still play worth a lick. Maybe I should just sit down and let the youngsters take over.

But there are other times I feel like one of them petrified trees me and Livy saw when we went out West in the sixties. The wood in those trees has turned to rock and maybe all my memories and the spring in my step and everything else I've lost—well, maybe all of that has turned into music, 'cause some days it feels like I'm better than ever.

But this wasn't one of those days.

We had dinner in the performers' tent. Mac and Fuzzy argued with one of the cooks over something special they wanted in their supper, ferns they found out in the woods. You'd think they would know better: Mac is almost forty and Fuzzy is just over thirty; together they're almost as old as me. But those boys still think nature is something out of a kiddy cartoon and anything with dirt on it is better for you than anything store bought. Me, I was enjoying a hamburger and corn on the cob. One of the volunteers, a pretty little Oriental girl, cut the corn for me, 'cause my teeth are on the down-go.

You meet the dangdest people at these festivals. At the next table there were these fellas from Africa who play their music on a gadget that looks like some old gourd with wires on it. Sounds great. Over on the other side were some gal musicians who look like my brother Rayford when he got back from fighting the Germans: shaved heads and combat boots. Takes all kinds, I suppose.

Mac put down his fork and leaned toward me. "Here comes the boss." Said it real quiet. "His name is Hank. You met him last night."

The festival director was a big, smiling man. "Cleve! Great to see you. They treating you okay?"

"Doing just fine, Hank. You got wonderful people here."

"We sure do. I can't tell you what an honor it is to have you here, Cleve. You know, I think your *Kentucky Reel* was the first album I ever bought."

"Is that a fact? Yeah, that one bought me groceries for quite some time."

"How you feeling, Cleve? I hope we haven't given you too busy a schedule."

Mac made a face. He knew, same as me, the boss must have heard I wasn't clicking on all cylinders today. He said, "You know, Hank, we just rolled in from the West Coast last night."

I followed Mac's trail. "Yeah. I'm still a little tired. Always takes

me a while to get kickin' after a long trip. But you just watch us tomorrow. Right, boys?"

Mac said, "You bet!" Fuzzy nodded, but he didn't look up from his vegetable stew.

Hank went off to glad-hand somebody else and Mac glared at me. "You'd better be good to go tomorrow, Granddad." He's no relation to me. I wouldn't put up with his nonsense from a real grandson. "We can't carry you forever."

Fuzzy said, "Ease up on him. It's not his fault he's too old."

I said, "Too old?" Ready to give him a piece of my mind.

"Is that what you told Hank?" Mac asked, real nasty.

Fuzzy didn't deny it. I felt right out of heart about that.

"Get up, old man," Mac told me the next morning. "You already missed breakfast."

I said, "I'm feeling sick."

He sat down on the edge of my hotel bed. It always burns me when he does that, but he doesn't care. "Rise and shine. We've got a living to earn, remember?"

He stood up and yanked down the covers. "Out. We're on stage in two hours."

"Tell 'em I'm too peaked. Tell 'em I'm old."

Mac put a hand on my shoulder and started to yank till I was sitting up. His thumb dug into my skin, a couple of inches from that old scar I got there.

He gave me a mean smile. "You think I won't hurt you?" Said it real soft. "Just try me and see."

"Keep squeezing and I won't even be able to hold my bow."

He let go. "On your feet, Cleve. It's another glorious day in show biz."

"Where's Fuzzy?"

"Ben went for a hike in the woods. He's not scheduled to play until after lunch." Ben is Fuzzy's real name. Fuzzy Sollerman was my first guitar player and I call all my pickers after him. Saved learning a bushel of names over the years.

Mac laughed. "You thinking of telling Ben what a bad man I am, Cleve? Paranoia is a symptom of Alzheimer's, you know. You start telling tales on me and it would give Ben just the proof he needs to put you in an old folks home. Is that what you want?"

I got up to greet the day the Lord provided.

All summer we play the festivals. Bluegrass, old-time, fiddle, and folk. All over the country, and Canada, too. When it turns cold we

switch to indoor shows. Seems like I've been doing this forever.

Summer Mountain had five small stages running all day, and then one big evening show every night. Me and Mac were on one of those little stages that morning, doing a workshop on Appalachian fiddling. Mac usually plays banjo with me, but he's a good fiddler in his own right, and he was showing off the licks he learned from a lot of good 'ol boys who've passed on.

I was right pleased that the host of the workshop was Isaiah Barwood, a colored fella from Alabama. He's a fine gentleman and plays Cumberland style, sweet as a bird singing. I hadn't seen him since he was Mac's age and now there's more salt than pepper in his hair.

But it was the fourth player who really got me thinking. He was between hay and grass, barely old enough to drive, and he had what they called bleach-blond hair, like one of them rock musicians.

This boy wore a white undershirt and dungarees. Now, that's no way to dress for a paying audience. Mac and Fuzzy complain about having to wear ties on stage but I won't play with them if they don't dress fitty. Mac always wears one of his silly-looking ties with cartoon characters and such, but I reckon that reflects on him, not me.

Anyway, that blond boy. Turned out he was from my home state, and Isaiah introduced him as "the next great Kentucky fiddler." Well, that made me sit up and pay attention, I tell you.

And he was fine. He had spent too much time listening to records and not enough to old boys in person, but he was good.

The four of us went through most of the show smooth as ice on a pond, taking turns and swapping tunes. Then that blond boy got up and made a speech about what an honor it was to be on stage with a living legend like Cleve Penny, and how proud he was to get a chance to hear me play tunes the way they used to play 'em.

The way they used to play 'em? What does that mean? Don't I still play 'em?

And then that boy done played "Snake in the Sweetgrass."

Now, excuse you me, but that's what they call a signature tune, and you don't play a signature tune when the man who made it famous is right up on the stage next to you. No sir. No sir.

My Mama, bless her heart, used to tell me back yonder: "The madder you get, the wider you smile." So I gave that blond boy the biggest grin I could fetch up.

Isaiah and Mac each played again and then it was up to me to finish the workshop. I stepped over to the microphone and told

everyone how honored I was to be there and what a wonderful time I was having.

"Now I'd like to play you a real old-timey tune that's rolled around my family for a coon's age. I learned it from my great-uncle Hodge Penny. It's called 'Snake in the Sweetgrass.' "

Then I burned that stage down. Yes sir. Yes sir.

That tune's supposed to start slow, but I could hear Mac standing up, ready to come tell me I was making a mistake, that I ought to play something else. He thought I was such a doddering fool I didn't know the song had just been played.

Well, fine. Let him think that. Let 'em all think that.

I jumped in too fast for him to interrupt, almost as glib as the blond boy was playing when he finished. And then I sped up.

Now, playing fast makes you look slick in a fiddling contest but speed don't mean much if you ain't going nowhere, if you get my drift. But Lord, I was traveling. I threw in extra shakes and trills, grace notes by the barrel, double-stops all over the place. I ran up the neck and down again. I took that tune places it had never been afore, my mercy.

Second time through the B part I turned around—just to show how easy this all was. Mac was bobbing his head and grinning like a fool; Isaiah winked at me. And that blond boy was pale as his undershirt.

Now you know how we used to play 'em, sonny.

When I stopped the crowd got up on their hind legs and cheered like it was V-J 'day.

"What was that stuff you and Mac had for lunch?" I asked Fuzzy. We were back at the hotel and he was helping me get ready for a nap.

"That's tofu, Cleve. You should try it."

"I took a bite. It looks like glue, but glue tastes better. No thanks; I had a rib sandwich with some fine barbecue sauce. It ate real good."

He frowned. "That stuff's bad for you. You need to take better care of yourself."

"Too late to start at my age. Help me get this shirt off."

"Your age is the point, Cleve. There's no need for you to be on the road all the time. You could stay home, do a concert every couple of months—"

"You want me to sit around and lose my edge, Fuzzy? I got a living to make." I'll bet that blond boy was wishing I would stay home and get rusty.

"Look, Cleve. I love performing with you. It's an honor. Maybe the highlight of my career."

"I hear a 'but' coming."

"There's no need for you to wear yourself out like this."

"There's people who want to hear me play, Fuzzy. That gal Rhonda called Mac today. She's booked us for two more week-ends next month."

"That's another thing." He grimaced. "You let Rhonda handle all your money as well as your booking."

"So?"

"You know she sleeps with Mac, right?"

I shook my head. "You think she's gonna steal my fortune, Fuzzy? Don't have one. But so far I'm keeping you in tofu, ain't I?"

"You're letting Mac control your life, Cleve. And maybe he doesn't have your best interest at heart."

I really didn't want to hear this stuff. "Not for you to say, Fuzzy. You cut your own weeds, and I'll do the same."

"Where'd you get that?"

"What?"

"You've got a new bruise on your shoulder."

I thought about what Mac had said. Paranoia is a symptom of Alzheimer's. "Must have bumped into something."

Mac woke me up from my nap at two and told me somebody was coming to interview me. A writer from *Wireless Strings*.

"Stupid name," I told him. "Never heard of it. Tell him I'm too tired. Besides, I have to get ready for tonight's show."

"It's Web based, Cleve. That's why you never heard of it."

"Web? You mean computers? Not even a real magazine? No sir. No sir. Tell him he can come back when he—what are you doing?"

Mac had opened my fiddle case and was dangling my best instrument off one finger by a tuning peg. "The reporter is a her, not a him. And she has to write about something. If you won't talk to her I can at least explain how a senile old man tripped and busted his hundred-year-old violin. I'll bet she can have people weeping over that. What do you say?"

I say that man has just about worn me clean through.

The writer—her name was Althea—turned out to be a real nice lady, and a fine looker, too. When she found out I hadn't seen anything of Summer Mountain State Park except the little corner where the festival was taking place she made Mac and me come out with her to see some of the pretty balds and meadows. I've

been all over this great country, and believe you me, there's no place more beautiful than these Appalachians.

All the time she drove she asked me questions and took down what I said with her little recording gadget. "Did you ever meet Carey Hillerman, Mr. Penny?"

"Sure did. Carey was a great fiddler. Beat me once in a contest in Mississippi. Fifty-seven, I think it was. 'Fessed up to me later he had an in with one of the judges."

"Oh, Mr. Penny! Really? He bribed him?"

"Not with money, of course. He'd a-never done that. But the judge had a very pretty sister and Carey promised not to court her if he won. See, Carey had a reputation in those days . . ."

Now, I'm pretty sure it was Lafe Grimms who bragged about doing that stunt, and he probably made it up. But Carey wouldn't have minded. And with both of them dead a coon's age, what's the harm if I tell a windy or two?

Althea drove us up to what she said was the prettiest spot in the whole park, but I told 'em I was too bushed to walk to the viewpoint.

"You mind if we take a little stroll without you, Cleve?" Mac asked. "Is that okay?" He was being real nice to me in front of the girl. I think he was sweet on her.

I said, "You go ahead. I'll just rest in the car."

And that's all I meant to do. But I looked over to the far end of the parking lot and there on the grass was a ring of mushrooms. People from my part of the mountains don't eat those things much, but I thought maybe the nature boys would enjoy them—better than that tofu stuff, for sure. So I got out to take a look.

Most of the mushrooms were white with little brown points down the side. Shaggy manes they're called, and they eat good. But a few in the ring were different. Gray-white, like a mourning dove, with a little dimple on the hat, and slits down the side of the stem. Those fellas sent a shiver right down my tail.

I remember my mama, bless her heart, saying back yonder: "See them, Cleveland? Them's sweatin' mushrooms. Don't never go near them. Just a bite of one of 'em killed your cousin Horace, my mercy."

I could hear her voice like she was standing next to me.

Althea and Mac were still out of sight. I felt in my jacket pocket and found the tinfoil wrapper from that sandwich I had for lunch. I fetched up a bunch of mushrooms, good and bad together, like dawn on the day of judgment.

Might come in handy.

Our first number at the big concert that night went fine. I started to play what I thought was the next tune and Mac stopped me. "We're gonna do 'Hickory Jack,' Cleve."

I just stared at him. " 'Hickory Jack?' " I swear I never heard the name before. Was he making it up?

A couple of thousand people staring at me and no idea what to do next. Lord, Lord.

Then Fuzzy picked out a rhythm and my hands took over. I had never heard that tune, I swear, but I guess my hands had. My fiddle started to play and I just closed my eyes and listened.

Can't remember the rest of the show, but folks said it was one of our best. 'Course, maybe they think of it that way on account of what happened later.

All the performers had a late supper to celebrate the end of the festival, and then I hit the hay. Mac and Fuzzy went back to the party.

Moans woke me up. First I guessed maybe Mac and that reporter had gotten along better than I thought, but it wasn't that kind of noise. Somebody was ailing.

Then came the sirens.

I closed my eyes and went back to sleep. Nothing an old man could do anyway.

Nobody came to get me for breakfast. I woke on my own and was just starting to go out when I heard somebody crying in the living room.

I waited 'til he was done. My old daddy, bless his heart, used to say back yonder, "Ain't no disgrace for a man to cry, son, but he shouldn't let nobody see him do it."

When the weeping stopped I went out. He was sitting on the couch with his head in his hands.

"Don't we have to hit the road today?" I asked.

Mac looked up at me. "Oh, Cleve. I'm so sorry. Ben is dead."

"Fuzzy?" I sat down, hard. "No. How did it happen?"

"Poison. They think he picked some mushrooms when he was out hiking yesterday. He must of put them in the soup he ate after the show. Some were fine, but damn it—" Looked like he was gonna cry again.

"What a shame. My mercy, what a shame." I almost said something harsh about those boys treating nature with too much love and not

enough caution, but that wouldn't have been fair, considering.

"Anybody call his family?" I asked.

Mac looked startled. "No. He's got a sister in New York. I'll have Rhonda look up the number."

I said, "Good."

He picked up that little phone of his and hit buttons, happy to be doing something. "While I'm at it, I'll have her cancel the other gigs."

"Whoa. What do you want to do that for?"

He stared at me. "Ben's dead, Cleve. I didn't think you would want to keep going—"

"You aren't thinking straight, son. I mean no disrespect to Ben; he was a fine player. But I don't reckon it was him people paid to see. And, while I don't like to brag, I believe there are plenty of guitar pickers who know my tunes."

I pointed to his little phone. "Shoot, I bet you could make three calls and find someone who would love to play with us next week. Am I right?"

"Yeah." Mac was nodding. "Yeah. I guess we owe it to Fuzzy—to Ben—to keep going."

"That's the spirit. I knew I could count on you."

He picked up the phone and I went to take a shower. My shoulder was aching. Not from that little pinch Mac gave me, that was nothing, but from the scar I got back yonder when I told Livy I was sick of the road and didn't want to tour anymore.

"You can't earn a cent without that fiddle, you no-account fool," she told me. "And do you think the people around this little town will pay enough to keep us alive?" Then she hit me on the shoulder with a red-hot fireplace poker.

What a woman. Forty three years she kept me going through all my miseries and blue funks. After the cancer took her from me I sat on the porch for almost five years, hardly ever touching the bow.

Then Mac came along, hunting for old Kentucky fiddlers. He shook me loose and got me playing again. Got me living again.

Was I supposed to wait 'til Fuzzy found some judge or doctor willing to take all that away from me? Make me retire for good, and sit on the porch again 'til me or the house collapsed?

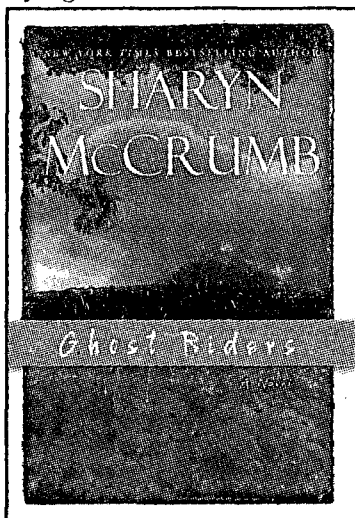
No sir. No sir.

There's people down the road waiting to hear me play. 🐍

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

The Civil War fascinates writers of all kinds, and mystery writers have enthusiastically weighed in with some excellent novels. Among those who have caught my eye is Miriam Grace Monfredo whose Cain trilogy forms a series within a series. Monfredo's Seneca Falls mysteries trace the history of the women's and minority rights movements in America from 1848 onward and the Cain



trilogy covers the Civil War period. Michael Kilian's series featuring Harrison Raines has reached four installments that follow the war in chronological fashion: *Murder at Manassas*, *A Killing at Ball's Bluff*, *The Ironclad Alibi*, and *A Grave at Glorieta*. Also following the war in chronological fashion is the fine series from Ann McMillan that began with *Dead March* in 1998.

A welcome addition to these volumes is Sharyn McCrumb's latest Ballad novel, ***Ghost Riders*** (Dutton, \$24.95), which blends past and present in a brilliant fashion to illuminate the continuing effects of that bloody conflict. The Civil War in the Appalachian region that McCrumb evokes so masterfully (particularly the mountainous areas where North Carolina and Tennessee intersect) was personal, bitter, and bloody and it divided families and neighbors for generations. McCrumb's Ballad series is not only consistently one of the best written, it is also one of the series most likely to be read with as much pleasure fifty years from now.

In *Ghost Riders* McCrumb combines compelling fictional characters and equally compelling historical ones such as Zebulon Vance, lawyer, officer, and governor of North Carolina, or Malinda and Keith Blalock, who lived and fought together as soldiers. Interspersing first-person accounts of the adventures of Zeb Vance and Malinda Blalock with the contemporary accounts of Rattler and Nora Bonesteel as they sense the disturbed forces still at work in the

region today, McCrumb breathes magic into the extraordinary lives of everyday people. McCrumb's novel sweeps across the breadth of the Civil War in exhilarating fashion while most of the mystery authors dealing with the theme are treating it in small increments.

That is the approach taken by Ann McMILLAN whose fourth novel, *Chickahominy Fever* (Viking, \$22.95), has just reached June, 1862 as it begins. McMILLAN's series leads include a white widow, Narcissa Powers, who's found useful employment as a nurse in the primitive field hospitals set up to deal with the endless flood of wounded and dying soldiers, and Judah Daniel, a free black herbalist who knows many secrets of people as well as of plants. Despite differences of race and class, the two women have found common cause in previous adventures and they do so once again as a unique opportunity to put an end to the war presents itself.

Richmond, Virginia played a major part in the war because of geography, and because its divided loyalties echoed that of the nation. McMILLAN exploits the setting to weave the stories of Union sympathizers, slaves, freed blacks, foot soldiers, spies, and Southern patriots into a tale that never loses sight of the horrific human costs of the war. One purloined letter might bring an early end to the conflict but ironically might also prolong the agony of slavery. McMILLAN's detailed saga puts a very human face on the suffering shared, but not equally, by those enmeshed in the snares of war.

The religious sleuth, of whatever denomination, has proven to be one of the most enduring and popular varieties since G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown first brought his ingenious observations to bear on criminal activity. Old pro Ralph McInerney's old pro Father Roger Dowling has appeared in more than twenty mysteries since 1977's *Her Death of Cold*. In his latest, *Last Things* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95) the sage counselor demonstrates yet again his ability to listen, observe, and advise in matters that always involve moral and ethical dilemmas explored in the context of a puzzling crime.

This time the dysfunctional Bernardo family's tangled relationships lead Father Dowling into a case of murder and an examination of the state of the church.

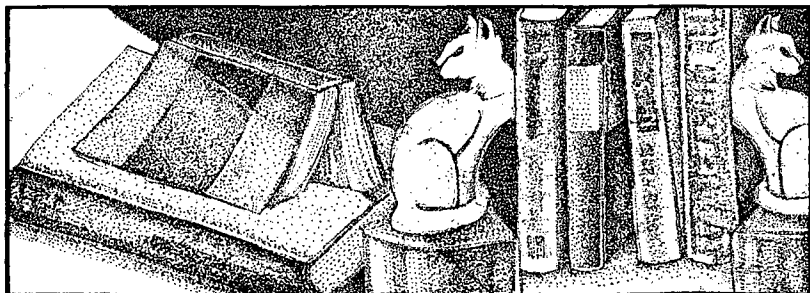


Raymond is a “runaway” priest, once envisioned as the future of St. Edmund’s, a small liberal arts college established by a religious order. Raymond’s departure from St. Edmund’s and essentially from the priesthood has alienated his father, Fulvio. But Fulvio’s potentially fatal hospitalization brings a reluctant Raymond back to Chicago and sets the table for his own self-examination. Meanwhile, Raymond’s brother, Andrew, a secular teacher, also has plenty to worry about as his position at St. Edmund’s is a bit precarious and is being challenged by a brash young colleague.

McInerny is adept at weaving disparate strands of narrative together to make both a pleasing and a puzzling whole and he does so again as he juggles school politics, religious beliefs, and good old-fashioned passions into a satisfyingly complex novel.

Michelle Blake’s Lily Connor mysteries (*The Tentmaker*, *Earth Has No Sorrow*) not only allow the Episcopalian priest to explore a crime, but in her latest mystery, *The Book of Light* (Putnam, \$24.95), to tackle an intriguing religious mystery. Like McInerny, Blake uses an academic setting. Lily is serving as interim priest at Tate University where Samantha Henderson, an old acquaintance, is head of the Religion Department. But Blake gives the reader a book that is part mystery, part thriller as Samantha pushes a reluctant Lily into renewing their acquaintance and lets her in on a dangerous secret.

Samantha and her assistant Francine have been chosen by an anonymous source to receive photocopies of pages from a manuscript that may or may not be genuine but appear to be Q material. Q is the name given to an unknown but theoretical missing gospel account. That such a document might have existed is a matter of debate, but if it did, there is no doubt it would be as important as Lily and Samantha consider it. It quickly becomes apparent that possession of the documents, genuine or not, is dangerous, and Lily and her friends are inexorably drawn into the question of the documents’ origin, authenticity, and the motives of the sender—and the matter of how to protect themselves and the documents from whoever is trying to recover them. Blake’s



handling of the Q material is deftly done and her clever resolution of a seemingly impossible situation should satisfy readers.

Austin Davis's first novel, *Shoveling Smoke* (Chronicle, \$23.95), is a wildly entertaining slapstick legal comedy, an East Texas tall tale full of drinking, philandering, corrupt horse traders, a vicious gang of retired airline pilots, a beautiful woman, and . . . emus. In the middle of this madhouse is Clay Parker, a burned-out tax lawyer from Houston seeking wisdom and peace in the tiny rural firm of Chandler and Stroud. Clay knows Gilliam Stroud by reputation: as a much younger man, Stroud was a crusader for justice. But when the newly-hired Clay arrives in the small town of Jenks, his first act is to bail the stinking drunk Stroud out of jail and bring him immediately to court, where Stroud is the defense counsel in an ongoing murder trial. Observing Stroud's tactics, Clay soon learns the firm's motto: Whatever works.

Stroud and the firm's other partner, the corpulent and lecherous Hardwick Chandler, have managed, through incompetence and neglect, to bungle a million dollar lawsuit brought by an insurance company against their client, the utterly dishonest Bevo Rasmussen, for torching a barn full of horses and attempting to collect on the policy. Clay discovers during his preparations for the trial that Chandler and Stroud have collected no evidence, deposed no witnesses, and ignored all the important paperwork that drives the legal system. A bewildering network of intertwined relationships adds to Clay's disorientation, and helps give a sense of the deceptive complexity of small-town life. Poor Clay Parker will get none of the quiet country lawyering he anticipated. Clay is not a very robust character—the details of his exit from Houston are missing—but Davis makes up for this by creating a rich setting for him, an intricate and sexy tangle that leaves the reader breathless and giggling after each short chapter. There is ample material here for future novels in a Clay Parker series. —Jonas Eno-Van Fleet

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

STACKED DECK

PERCY SPURLARK PARKER

Big Bull Benson put his address book down and started up from his desk. He couldn't recall the name of the party supply store he'd gotten the Christmas decorations from last year. Sam would know. He was good at retaining information like that. The best place for wholesale meats, the easiest electrician to get hold of, who could repair a bar stool . . . just ask Sam.

Bull stopped. He sat back down, leaning back in his leather swivel. He couldn't ask Sam a damn thing anymore. They couldn't share a drink. They couldn't laugh and joke about old times. All that was gone now. Sam Devlin had died six weeks ago.

Peacefully in his sleep, the coroner had said. Hell, he was in his nineties.

This wasn't the first time Bull had started to ask Sam a question, thought he saw him behind the counter tending bar, or thought he heard Sam's raspy voice only to realize it was just wishful thinking.

They'd known each other for over forty years. Bull was a fatherless teen, running the streets. Rolling drunks was a way for a black kid to make some money, easier than a regular job. Bull had some size on him back then; he'd hit six feet early and was still growing, with young, supple muscles, not quite stone hard but they were enough. There wasn't anyone he felt he couldn't beat to the ground, old or young, it didn't matter.

It had been late, past midnight. He'd stood just within the mouth of the alley, watching, waiting. The dapper little dude coming down the street wasn't stumbling all over the sidewalk, but he was a little unsteady. From the way it fit, his suit was tailored, and the street lamps reflected on the shine of his shoes. It was like a dollar sign coming his way.

Bull had stepped back into the alley, listening as the footsteps got closer. Another easy score. He waited until the little dude was crossing the mouth of the alley, his back to him. He sprung, getting his arms around the man's thin shoulders. He had him for all of two seconds.

The back of the dude's head smashed into Bull's face. He let go

of his hold, falling backward. One, two, three blows pounded into his chest. He backed hard into the side of the building, dazed, gasping for air. He started off the wall getting his eyes focused and came to a complete halt. The little dude was pointing a steel-blue .32 right at his face.

He was almost as black as the alley itself, his hair slicked back, a toothpick in the corner of his mouth, the gun cocked and unwavering. "Boy, have ya lost what little sense God gave ya?"

That's how they'd met. For some reason Sam hadn't pulled the trigger, but took Bull

**Bull had better things to do
than try to help a murderer
get out of jail.**

under his wing instead. Sam was one of the slickest gamblers around back then. He'd shared his knowledge with Bull, molded him. True, all he was today, his reputation, his money in the bank, his hotel, he owed to Sam.

He got the bottle of Granddad from the bottom desk drawer and poured himself a double. Toasting Sam, he downed the bourbon in one gulp, feeling the burn as it ran down his throat. He was about to pour another when someone knocked on his door.

"Mr. Benson?" she asked, coming into his office.

He couldn't recall ever seeing her before. She was maybe in her late thirties. Her thick shoulder-length hair was just beginning to show some gray. Her heavy coat hid her figure.

"May I?" she asked.

He nodded, and she took one of the chairs in front of his desk. She had a deep tan complexion; a few strokes of eyeliner and a slight reddening of her lips were the extent of her makeup.

Bull smoothed his mustache with his thumb and forefinger. "What can I do for you, Miss . . ."

"Alexander. Ruby Alexander." She paused. "I don't know if I did the right thing by coming here, Mr. Benson. I just thought I'd take the chance you might be able to help."

Perfect strangers had hit him up for money before. For some he gladly dug into his wallet, for others he showed them the door.

"It's my son, Mr. Benson. He's in jail and he's innocent."

"A lot of parents think that, Mrs. Alexander. How sure are you?"

"I know my son, Mr. Benson. And you were right the first time, it's Miss. I've never been married. Maybe that's a mark against me, but I've raised my son right. He didn't kill that little girl."

That triggered it for him. A ten-year-old girl had been murdered

on the west side last week, bludgeoned to death. The cops had been working overtime to clear the case. He'd heard something on the news yesterday about them having a suspect in custody.

"The Johnson girl?"

It was her turn to nod.

"Forgive me. But I've got to ask again. Are you sure he's innocent? Is there any doubt anywhere? Some little corner in your mind that says, well, maybe?"

"No. None."

Reading people had been a mainstay of his for years, whether he was sitting at a card table deciding if he should kick in the next bet or getting the lowdown from an informant who was too shy to go directly to the cops. If nothing else, Bull felt she truly believed her son to be innocent.

"Just what do you expect me to do?"

She shrugged, shook her head. "I don't know, Mr. Benson. They say you help folks sometimes. You've got to help my boy. Everybody thinks he did it. I don't know who else to go to." She broke down then, crying into her cupped hands, her shoulders heaving.

He didn't know enough about the case to have an opinion on whether her son was guilty. He just knew he'd felt a certain relief when he learned the cops had arrested someone. He'd never had much tolerance for anyone harming a child. As far as he was concerned the punishment couldn't be too harsh or too swift.

He got up and went around to her, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Try to get hold of yourself, Miss Alexander. I know this isn't easy for you."

She looked up, her dark brown eyes wet with tears. "Will you help my son, Mr. Benson? Please."

The cops have made hasty decisions before. But in cases like this they usually put in the extra effort to make sure they've got it right. Not knowing anything else, he had to side with the boys in blue this time. But how could he tell her that? She was pinning her last hopes on him.

"I can't make any promises, but I'll look into it, okay?"

"Oh, bless you, bless you," she said, grabbing his hand and kissing it.

He freed himself, feeling a tinge of embarrassment. "I can't work miracles, Miss Alexander. I've run into plenty of blank walls in my day. Hope for the best, sure, but don't expect anything."

He got as much information as he could from her before she left his office. According to her, her son Rodney had never belonged to any gang. That was quite an accomplishment, if it was true. He was

in the R.O.T.C. in school and planned to join the Marines when he graduated this coming June.

The murdered girl, Francine Johnson, lived two apartments down from theirs on the fourteenth floor of Building A in the Webster Housing Project. Bull was familiar with the complex. Like a number of others in the city, it was a cluster of high-rise buildings erected to house low-income families. Crime was no stranger to the place. Dope dealing, murder, rape, breaking and entering, muggings, gang wars, it had all happened there. Sometimes the incidents were big enough to make the six o'clock news. The rest were a matter of day-to-day activity.

She hadn't been able to suggest who could have committed the crime; she could only affirm her belief in her son's innocence. That wasn't going to get any charges dropped—or for that matter make Bull feel other than that he was going through the motions on this one.

Lieutenant Paul Forebridge worked out of the Medallion Street Precinct, the boundaries of which encompassed the Webster Housing Project. Short and dumpy, his sandy-gray hair thinning on top, he looked much older than he actually was. "We got the kid dead to rights," he said, talking around a wad of gum.

They were in Forebridge's cubicle in a corner on the second floor of the precinct. His desk was cluttered with stacks of thick file folders and gum wrappers. A PLEASE DO NOT SMOKE plaque peeked out from behind one of the folders.

"Did he confess?" Bull asked, trying to find a comfortable position on the wooden chair on the visitor's side of Forebridge's desk.

"Not yet. I guess if he wants to ease his conscience he can try confessing," Forebridge said shrugging. "It won't make any difference with the outcome. DNA is going to march his ass to the gurney."

DNA findings were getting unjustly convicted people released from prison regularly, and confirming the guilt of many more. When all the bricks lined up the way they should, DNA was a difficult wall to climb.

"I'm a little behind on this. Was she molested?"

"Naw, he didn't get that far. Probably got too nervous after he killed her." Forebridge paused, glanced around as though he was mulling over something in his mind, then dug into one of the piles and pulled out a folder. "I shouldn't be showing you this, we haven't released everything to the public yet, but I want you to see what kind of scum we're dealing with here."

The first photo in the folder was a closeup of the back of Francine's

head where she was struck. Bull wasn't prepared for it and it took him a moment or two to compose himself. There were other photos at different angles, and a detailed outline of the wound from the coroner's office with a lot of medical jargon penciled in. There were also photos of a length of lead pipe, about a foot long and an inch in diameter, which was identified as the murder weapon.

"Prints?"

"Naw, too smudged. But we got the DNA."

"Yeah, you said that. You get the DNA off the pipe?"

Forebridge shook his head. "Better than that. I'm telling ya, you don't want to get balled up in this one, Bull. It's a waste."

"You're probably right, but I made a promise."

"You got to learn to say no."

"I keep telling myself that. Maybe next time. So what've you got?"

"It's a done deal, Bull," Forebridge said, working on his gum. A droplet of saliva escaped to the corner of his mouth. He captured it with a flick of his tongue, took a breath. "There were scratches on the back of Alexander's left hand, and pieces of skin under the victim's fingernails. DNA made the match. How cut and dry do you want it?"

Bull wondered what the hell was he doing there. He had better things to do than try to help a murderer get out of jail.

"Go on home, Bull. Find a poker game somewhere."

He nodded. "That's not bad advice, Paul. Can I count you in?"

"Just tell me when and where."

Outside, the bite of the winter wind caused him to button his coat and turn up his collar. His car was in the visitor's parking lot—last year's Caddy, black with gray interior. He walked quickly to it, got in, and got the engine started before he dug out a cigar. He cracked the window slightly to let the smoke out as he fired up the tobacco.

He knew it would come to this all along. He would simply have to tell Ruby Alexander her son was guilty. But how exactly was he going to do that? He could be blunt, crude, or downright nasty if he wanted to. But he knew he wouldn't. He'd have to figure some way to make it easy on her.

"I'm afraid he's guilty," he would say.

"He can't be," she would reply.

"The police have the evidence," he would tell her.

"The evidence is wrong," she would counter.

"Not this time," he would insist.

"I know my son, Mr. Benson. Do you? Have you talked to him?"

"No," he would have to admit.

He got his flip phone out and called Chester K. Lonsworth's office. Chet had been the only lawyer he'd ever dealt with. Sam had

introduced them back when Chet was just starting out, and Bull had won the deed to his hotel after an all-night poker game. A mean poker player himself, Chet was also a terror in the courtroom.

Rodney Alexander was downtown at central lockup. No one could see him except for his lawyer, thus Chet was Bull's visitor's pass.

He and Chet stood in the interview room as Rodney was led in by two guards. They removed his handcuffs and exited the room, closing the door behind them. The top half of the door and wall was meshed glass; the guards stood outside the room looking in on them.

"They said my lawyer wanted to see me," Rodney said. He was maybe five-ten or eleven. The way his shoulders and biceps flexed under his gray long-sleeved shirt showed he worked out. He had his mother's features, especially around the eyes and in the shape of his brow, now wrinkled in a frown.

"I'm Attorney Lonsworth," Chet said, stepping forward.

"You're not the lawyer the court appointed."

"No, no I'm not," Chet said. "I'm here at the request of Mr. Benson."

"You Benson?"

Bull nodded. "Your mother asked me to help you."

"You know my mother?"

"Met her today."

Rodney looked from one to the other, pulled a chair back from the small table occupying the center of the room, and sat down. He shook his head. "I don't get it."

"Maybe I can explain," Chet said. He slipped off his overcoat and draped it over one of the chairs at the table. He was clean shaven these days, had been ever since the gray started growing in on only one side of his mustache. It was either shave or dye the other side, Chet had told Bull.

"Mr. Benson here," Chet continued, "among other things, has a rep for helping people who get jammed up at times."

"So, like what? You just pop in here and wave your hand and all this goes away?"

"It's not going to be that easy," Bull said.

"Heard you plan to go into the service this summer," Chet said.

"Right now, I'll settle for getting out of here."

Chet sat down and opened his briefcase, which had been lying on the table. Bull remained standing. He flipped through some papers. "Cops think they got you six ways from Sunday on this."

"I didn't kill Francine."

"Make me believe it," Bull said.

"How? If the police don't believe me, why should you?"

Bull shrugged. "Hell, maybe I won't. Maybe my trip down here is just a waste of time. Talk to me."

Rodney looked down at the table, back up to him. "I . . . I don't know what to say. I didn't do it. I played around with her, like I do with all the kids in the building. I've refereed ballgames, chaperoned trips to the zoo. Stuff like that, that's all. I'm almost eighteen, and she was what, nine, ten? It's sick to think I'd do anything to her."

"You like Rod or Rodney?" Chet asked.

"Rodney."

Chet nodded. He took a pair of rimless glasses from his inside coat pocket. He slipped them on, glanced at the papers he'd taken from his briefcase, took the glasses off. "You got a girlfriend, Rodney?"

"*Had* up until a couple weeks ago."

"What happened?"

"She decided I wasn't fun anymore. Least, that's what she said."

Chet grunted a laugh. "I had a couple of wives who felt the same way. What's the young lady's name?"

"Naomi Carver. She lives in my building."

Chet jotted something down. "How long had you been going together?"

"About eight months."

"Long time. How did you feel about the breakup?"

"How do you think I felt? I'm trying to get some money together to take her to the Rappin' Royalty concert, and she ups and tells me we're history."

"They can be cold at time. Something like that's almost enough to turn you against all females."

" 'Bout right," Rodney said, then stopped and looked hard at Chet. "Hey, naw, man. You can't say I killed Francine because I was mad at Naomi."

"I wouldn't say it, but the D.A. might. They've got serial killers locked up now who've been killing the same person over and over. Women who remind them of their mothers or ex-girlfriends."

"Where are you getting all that crap from? I'm no serial killer."

"Maybe this was just your first outing."

"What kind of lawyer are you? I thought you were on my side."

"Not yet, Rodney. Where were you between six and nine P.M. the night Francine Johnson was murdered?"

"I told the police. I went for a walk, over by the lake."

"At night, in winter, by the lake in this city? Come on, can't you come up with something better than that?"

Rodney raised his hands palms up. "It's the truth. I go there a lot. And the cold don't bother me like it does most folks."

"Anybody see you?"

"Sure. There were people on the streets who drove by, and people I passed on the sidewalk, but nobody I knew, or knows me."

"What about the scratches on your hand?"

Rodney moved his left hand off the table. Bull had noticed the two almost inch-long marks on the back of the hand and was wondering when Chet would mention them.

Rodney took another moment. "Francine scratched me. You know how kids do. She was just playing around."

"Kids play in some strange ways at times."

Rodney nodded.

"You played with all the kids around there?"

"I said I did."

"Some more than others?"

"I don't think so—maybe."

Chet slipped his glasses on. "Let's say that Francine thought so. Think she could've had a little crush on you?"

"Naw. I saw her more than the others. She lived two doors down from me."

"Never gave her any extra hugs?"

"I said she lived right down the hall from me, that's all."

"So, you didn't pay any special attention to her?"

He bit his lower lip. "Look, you got to understand."

"Understand what, Rodney?"

He inhaled, let it out slowly. "You're going to be my lawyer, aren't you?"

"Maybe. What did you want me to understand?"

He took another moment to speak. "Okay, she had a crush on me. I didn't realize it until she told me she knew Naomi and me had broke up. Said she wanted to be my girlfriend." He paused again. "Offered to go to bed with me."

The glasses came off again. "And what did you do?"

"I told her she was too young to be saying things like that."

"Just like that?" Chet snapped. "You didn't think about a little sample first."

"No I didn't. I turned her down. That's when she got mad and scratched me."

"Then what?"

"She ran away."

"You go after her?"

"No."

"You didn't try to catch her . . . to retaliate? That scratch had to hurt."

"After what she said, I was afraid to go near her."

Outside, Chet buttoned his coat against the winter weather. Bull noticed the onset of a double chin. "Well, am I on the case or not?"

Bull had been trying to decide that very same question. Nothing in the interview had jumped out at him and said Rodney Alexander was innocent. Indeed, there was more that pointed to his guilt.

Chet, as usual, had been a master at slicing into the story. He'd raised points and issues that Bull wouldn't have ventured into. Bull loved to watch him work; he had sat in court a dozen or so times over the years to see Chet do his thing.

But the question still remained. Bull stuck a cigar in his mouth and bit down, getting the flavor of the tobacco. There was no reason he should help Rodney Alexander, none whatsoever. Bull didn't owe him or his mother anything. There were no debts to be paid. He promised to look into it and he'd done that. There was just no sense in going any further. Not unlike that night in the alley, when there was no sound reason why Sam should not have shot him.

"Yeah, it's a go," Bull said. "As dumb as it sounds, it's not that I think he's innocent, I just can't convince myself he's guilty."

Chet tilted his head slightly. "Whatever you say, Bull. Personally, I think you're pissing in the wind on this one. But if that's what you want to do . . . I'll get with the public defender's office and make arrangements to take over the case."

"By the way, you did some beautiful work in there. How did you figure Francine had a crush on him?"

"Seemed logical. He was this big playmate for all the kids. An easy invite for puppy love. I was surprised about the offer she made him, if she made it."

"Kids are getting older every day, it could've happened."

"Yeah, that's the sad part about it," Chet said.

"Think I'll check in with Rodney's neighbors. Find out what I can on that end."

"I can have my guys do the legwork," Chet said, then stopped. "Never mind, I know how you are. Just let me know if you come across anything important." They parted with a handshake, then both men ran to their respective vehicles to get out of the chill.

Bull hit rush hour traffic driving back to the west side from central lockup, and the twenty-minute expressway trip took him forty. It gave him time to think about Rodney's responses to Chet's questions. The cops were hanging their hats on the DNA evidence. Rodney's explanation was weak, but not altogether unbelievable. More and more children are becoming sexually active every day.

Watch any of the talk shows for any length of time and they're bound to do a program on babies having babies. Francine liked Rodney, and she thought the way to get him to like her was to have sex with him. When he turned her down, out of anger and frustration she'd scratched him. A child would strike out, not being mature enough to control her emotions. For that matter, there've been a number of prominent adults who've had problems controlling their emotions—a certain prizefighter came to mind, one or two tennis players, and at least half the members of the NHL. Still, the cops had the best scenario: Rodney had gotten scratched as Francine tried to fight him off just before he killed her. The deck seemed to be stacked pretty much against him.

The Webster Housing Project consisted of four oblong brick buildings in a semicircle facing State Street. The front of the structures encompassed an area that was suppose to be a park, but the place always had more dirt than grass, even in the summer. Night was approaching and the buildings looked more like dark, giant tombstones than anything else.

There was parking behind each of the buildings. Building A was the first one on Bull's left, its lot strewn with broken glass and trash. He found a fairly clean spot three rows back, guided the Caddy into it.

There were two elevators in the center of the building, gang sign graffiti scrawled on their doors, along with a few enterprising cartoons. Enclosed stairwells capped each end of the building. The elevator was probably the most dangerous way to travel up or down, especially for a stranger to the building. Gang activity in project complexes had always been a problem, and gangs were noted for being very territorial. En route to his designated floor, the elevator could stop along the way, the doors would open, and he could easily be facing a half dozen guns.

But Bull didn't linger too long on the thought of any possible threat. He punched the elevator button. He wasn't about to walk to the fourteenth floor.

The elevator ride was uneventful, although the cables sounded as if they might snap at any moment, and the car smelled as though it was a storage dump for used socks.

There were twenty apartments on each floor, five units back to back on each side of the elevators. Walkways bordered the elevator banks and provided access to the apartments on the backside of the building. The place was originally built with a three-foot-high brick wall as a guardrail along the corridor in front of the apartments, but heavy chain-link fencing had been added, blocking off the open

spaces to prevent someone from dropping a bottle over the side, or a rival gang member.

Bull had gotten the names of Ruby Alexander's immediate neighbors before she left his office. She and Rodney lived in the first apartment north of the elevators. He decided to take the apartments in order, and knocked on the door of the apartment next to the Alexanders'.

The kid who opened the door was about fourteen or fifteen, and from the information Bull had gotten he had to be Kyle Drew. His Rams sweat shirt and blue jeans were at least two sizes too large for him, but that's the way kids wore their clothes these days. When Bull was coming up, if his clothes didn't fit him or if he had a hole in his jeans, he would've been talked about from one end of the block to the other.

"Yeah?" Kyle questioned. Bull had never heard the word spoken so harshly before. It was as if Kyle was trying to hack up something deep in his throat.

"Are your folks in, Kyle? I'd like to talk to them, if I may."

Kyle looked Bull up and down. Tiny braids crisscrossed his narrow scalp. Small dark eyes focused in on Bull's face. "You a cop?"

"Not even close."

"You look like a cop." He wrinkled his nose. "You smell like a cop."

"Guess I'll have to change my cologne."

"If you ain't a cop, how'd you know my name?"

Bull thought a moment on what to say and how to say it. Came up with, "Miss Alexander told me. I'm looking into a few things concerning the trouble her son's in."

"Rodney the rapist? You trying to get that perv out of jail?"

So much for attempting to be tactful. "I'm just checking some things out for her. Maybe he doesn't belong in jail . . ."

"He belongs in the ground. He killed Francine and that's that."

"You know this for a fact?"

Kyle started to say something, stopped, then said, "He's lucky the cops got him. Everybody 'round here liked Francine. She was like my little sister. Rodney was always trying to be better than everybody else."

"That makes him a murderer?"

Kyle's narrow face nodded. "Turning out that way, ain't it?"

Bull didn't feel he was going to get much further with Kyle. The kid had Rodney pegged as guilty and he wasn't wavering.

Some time back he'd had some business cards made up; every now and then he got to pass one of them out. They simply read, JEROME "BULL" BENSON, BENSON HOTEL/BULLPEN LOUNGE, and gave the address and phone number.

"Ask your folks to call me when they get in."

Kyle sneered at the card he'd handed him. "If I don't forget," he said as he slammed the door.

Francine's mother wasn't at home, but Elvin Pratt, the live-in boyfriend, invited Bull in out of the cold. The apartment was small, warm, and tidy. Pratt offered him a seat on a vinyl sofa that looked fragile, but it took Bull's weight without a murmur.

Pratt was dark skinned with heavy eyebrows, a heavy mustache, and at least two days' beard starting high on his cheekbones. He sat in a straight-backed chair across from Bull, a near-spent quart of beer on the floor next to him.

"I know you don't remember me, but I know you," Pratt said. "I used ta work as a helper for Knight Distributors 'fore my back went out. Your place was on our route."

"They say the world keeps getting smaller. How's your back coming along?"

"Some days good," Pratt shrugged. "Some days not so good." He reached down, got his beer bottle, and took a swallow. "Sorry Mae Ellen ain't here. She couldn't miss any more time from work."

"Be sure to give her my condolences."

"I sure will, Mr. Benson. What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking into matters for Miss Alexander. It's difficult for her to believe her son could have harmed Francine."

"Guess it would be. But that's what everybody says happened."

"Do you believe he did it?"

Pratt shrugged. "Hell, what'd I know? That boy might've been planning it for some time. Francine was a cute little thing. Just like her momma. She would've turned a lot of heads in a few more years. Had a sassy little walk."

"You ever see or hear anything that may have indicated Rodney had these thoughts about Francine?"

He shook his head. "No, no. I'm just saying he might've. She was around him a lot. Who knows what he was thinking? Some little girls are little girls, and some you can tell are gonna be knockouts when they grow up." He took another swallow of beer. "He could've saw that in her. It was there to see."

"Did you?" Bull asked. He'd had an uneasy feeling about Pratt from the moment they sat down to talk. Everything Pratt said about Rodney could easily be applied to himself.

"I see where you coming from," Pratt said. "Understandable. I'm not Francine's daddy. I'm just living here with her momma. Cops were on me from day one, until they put the collar on Rodney."

That didn't give Pratt a clean bill of health; it only meant Rodney

was an easier target. They talked for another fifteen minutes with nothing significant coming of it. Bull thanked him for his time and left with growing negative feelings about Elvin Pratt.

There was no one home at the next apartment. Bull left one of his cards stuck in the doorjamb, with a penciled note to call him. The elderly couple in the last apartment thought the whole thing was just horrible. They couldn't believe, or as they put it, didn't want to believe Rodney had anything to do with Francine's death.

Ruby Alexander answered the door at his first knock and welcomed him in.

"I just stopped by to let you know I've got my lawyer taking over Rodney's case."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," she said, grabbing and hugging him.

He gently pried himself free. "In all honesty, I've got to tell you I'm still not sure a hundred percent of Rodney's innocence."

A lock of her hair dangled over her left eye. "I don't understand. Why are you helping if you think he's guilty?"

"I didn't say I thought he was guilty. Right now I've got a lot of doubts on either end. I'm doing what I can do. Just don't get your hopes up, okay?"

He lit a cigar on the way down in the elevator. The rich aroma of the tobacco helped offset some of the stench in the car. He was trying to make sense out of what, if anything, he'd learned. Actually, other than knowing Elvin Pratt was never going to be one of his favorite people, there hadn't been much. He hadn't turned up any other names, no one else to seek out, no suspect the cops had overlooked. He was pretty much at a dead end.

He saw them when he stepped off the elevator, a group of maybe six dark figures. He didn't realize they were standing by his Caddy until he stepped into the parking lot. The six became seven, with two smaller figures on the fringe of the cluster.

The figures grew features as he got closer. Six male, one female, somewhere in their late teens or early twenties. Kyle Drew was one of the smaller figures.

"What are ya doing 'round here, big man?" It was the center figure speaking. He was holding the business card that Bull had given Kyle.

"Right now, I'm trying to get to my car," Bull said.

"Might be the best thing for you," the figure said, flipping the card back and forth between his fingers.

"Thanks for the advice . . ." Bull let the sentence trail off.

"Jamal," the figure said. He had a thick head of hair, wide eyes, a hint of a mustache. His leather jacket outlined broad shoulders.

Hanging onto Jamal was a young woman, a head shorter, light skinned, cute even without all the makeup.

"Well, Jamal," Bull said as he walked around to the door on the driver's side. "I'm sure Kyle told you what I've been doing?"

He shrugged. "He said somethin' about you helping Rodney."

"I'm just trying to get at the truth."

"Truth is that creep offed an innocent little girl."

Bull shrugged. "Could be," he said.

"He ought to have his stuff cut off," the female said, the words coming rapidly with a lot of anger.

"Take it easy, Naomi baby," Jamal shushed, putting an arm around her.

"Naomi Carver?" Bull questioned.

She nodded. "Yeah, so?"

"You and Rodney used to go together, right?"

She nodded again.

"What happened?"

She squirmed some in Jamal's arm. "Just got old."

"Found somethin' better," Jamal added. "Ain't that right, baby?"

"You know it," she said, smiling up to him.

"Well, tell me, while you were going with Rodney, did you ever think he was capable of doing anything like this?"

She hesitated. "No, I guess not. He had this bug up his butt about the Marines. I got tired of him talking about it all the time."

"Before Francine was killed, did any of you think Rodney could do such a thing?"

The question got mumbles, but no one came up with a yes.

"So why are you so damn sure he did it?"

Jamal didn't hold back. "We got a witness," he said, smirking. "Rodney's lucky the cops got him before we did."

"Police didn't say anything about a witness."

A shrug from Jamal. "We don't talk to the cops."

"I'm not a cop," Bull said. "Who's the witness? Prove to me I've been wasting my time all day."

Jamal studied him for a moment, finally said, "Why not? Kyle, tell the man the way it went down."

Kyle stepped around to the front of the group, looked to Jamal, started talking before he turned back to Bull. "Rodney killed her. He caved the back of her head in."

"You saw him do it?"

"I saw Rodney follow Francine into the basement. We all play down there sometimes. I didn't think anything of it until later."

Kyle melted back into the crowd.

"If the cops come by, Kyle here don't know nothing," Jamal said. "They got Rodney now. If they screw up and let him go, we'll take care of him."

"Sounds like you counting on them letting him go?"

"We've given it some thought. Crap like this happening in my building, makes it look like I can't take care of my people. I'd like the chance to show what happens when ya mess with my folks. Maybe he'll make bail."

Driving back to his hotel, Bull was still leaning toward Rodney being guilty. So he was a clean-cut kid up until the murder. How many murderers fit that description? More than anyone would like to think, he imagined. Murderers should all come with a jagged scar running from one corner of an eye down to the tip of their chin. Beady eyes wouldn't hurt, maybe a big nasty boil on the side of the neck. It would be easy then. Everyone would know who to trust, and whom to avoid. But as Sam often said, "What fun would that be?"

Kyle had seen Rodney going into the basement with Francine. It didn't make any difference that he hadn't gone to the cops. He'd reported it to his authority figure, Jamal. And Jamal was more than willing to take action, to reaffirm his control of the Webster Housing Project, if he could ever get his hands on Rodney. Naomi hooking up with Jamal after her split with Rodney was probably just that, with nothing else to be read into it. Couples break up and go their separate ways all the time. It's just that in this instance things had occurred one on top of the other, which looked a little suspicious at first, but on closer inspection he could see nothing more to it.

One thing was puzzling Bull, though—he wasn't feeling much animosity toward Rodney. A crime against a child was the worst crime of all, and he'd come across nothing to prove Rodney wasn't guilty. His take on such a crime was simple: forget about a trial, take the perpetrator out somewhere and put one behind the ear. Quick and final. Leave a message for the other nutcases out there. But even with the photos from the folder fresh in his mind, he was finding it difficult to build any hatred against the kid he saw at central lock-up.

Not so with Elvin Pratt. Francine's mother's boyfriend just didn't set well with Bull. He didn't like the way Pratt spoke about the dead girl. The undertones there had knotted his stomach. He tolerated it, only to see if there was more to learn. But now he wished he'd just swung and knocked the bastard out of his chair.

When he got back to his hotel he used the rear entrance, stopping at the kitchen long enough to put in an order for a couple of steak sandwiches. Next, he hit the lounge, throwing out a few hel-

los and nods to the patrons in the joint. Mavis had bar duty tonight. If Sam had been behind the counter, he would've had a Granddad poured and waiting for him as he approached.

"Any messages?"

She touched the side of her wide nose. "Just Chet. Said he'll call back."

"I'll be in my office if you need me."

His steak sandwiches beat him back to his office, along with a large mug of coffee. He polished off the food and the coffee before picking up the phone and dialing Chet's home number.

"Okay. I'm officially the Alexander boy's lawyer of record, but I didn't know what you wanted me to do about getting him out. Bail's five hundred thousand."

It would mean coming up with fifty thousand dollars, which wasn't impossible, but for now was out of the question. "The kid's where he belongs, Chet."

"Why, what did you find out?"

He told him, in as much detail as he could recall.

"So, this Kyle kid saw him, huh?"

"That's what I was told."

"Funny."

"How so?"

"Cops arrested Rodney three days after the murder. Just curious when Kyle told his homeboys. Seems they should've had time to carry out the threat they were making if they knew earlier."

It was a point Bull had missed, not that he could tell if it meant anything or not.

"Let's put things on hold right now, Chet," he said. He rarely had trouble making decisions; this wasn't one of those times. "I'll catch up with you in the morning and let you know what I want you to do."

"Whatever you say. Later."

He got the bottle of Granddad out of his bottom drawer and poured himself a double. It relaxed him somewhat. Funny, he hadn't realized he'd become so tense until he began to calm down. What the hell was screwing him up so? Was Rodney a murderer, or not? Should he stand by the kid, or pull out and count his involvement as one big mistake? Was there anything, anything at all that pointed to Rodney being innocent? No.

Sitting in his office wasn't doing him any good. He needed to be around people. He went back into the Bullpen, got behind the bar with Mavis, and began serving drinks. He laughed and joked with the patrons, flirted with a few of the women. Lucas came in from the insurance company across the street. A dapper little dude. Bull

had never seen him without a shirt and tie. Like Bull, he enjoyed the virtues of a hundred-proof Granddad. Over the years they'd had a number of obscure debates. The discussion tonight was on the subtle differences between a thong and a G-string.

The conversation was about as far away from a young girl getting the back of her head bashed in as could be. How many times does a thought or conversation start out in one direction and like falling dominos collide into another thought, and another and another until the original topic is far removed, if not totally forgotten. But Francine's murder had never been that far away from him. It had been there with all the laughing and talking, with all the wisecracks swapped with folks in the bar. It had been there waiting for him to open his ears, to hear what had been said, to make the connections.

He excused himself and went back to his office. Seven or eight months ago he'd made the big step and bought a computer. He had a printer and he was hooked up to the Internet with a phone line. Yet, the Information Highway was a bumpy road for him. He'd tackled the computer a few times, but for the most part it had sat in the corner of his office daring him to come closer.

It took him a dozen tries and half a cigar to figure out what he was doing enough for him to find his way into the back issues of the local newspapers. He didn't try to print out the accounts of the murder but read off the monitor, taking his time to make sure he didn't miss anything. Over and over the papers stated Francine had been bludgeoned to death, a length of lead pipe the possible murder weapon. *The Challenger*, the paper that served the black communities of the city, had the most descriptive story. One quote was from the janitor who'd discovered the body. "There was just so much blood, I couldn't stand to look at her."

The image came to him of Lieutenant Forebridge, hesitating, then handing him the folder containing the details of the murder.

Open your ears and hear what's being said, he told himself. If he had, he might have wrapped up the whole thing by now. The killer had given himself away. At least now he knew why he hadn't been able to feel any animosity toward Rodney Alexander. There was no reason to hate someone who was innocent.

He went over to his desk and dialed the Medallion Street Precinct. Forebridge had gone home for the day. He was transferred to three other detectives before he got someone who knew him well enough to give him Forebridge's home number.

"You sure about this, Bull?"

"It's what I heard, Paul. It took me a while to realize it. Check it

out. I can do it, but you've got the badge, as you've reminded me a time or two."

"Yeah, right. When have you ever listened to me?" He paused. "Okay, I'll take your word for it. I'll swing by Webster first thing in the morning."

"Any way you could look into it tonight?"

"Hey, I'm at home. I've got my shoes off. I'm relaxed. Tomorrow's good enough. If your boy's innocent, another night in jail won't kill him. On the other hand, I happen to think he's where he belongs."

Forebridge didn't call until seventeen minutes after eleven. Bull had been totally attentive to every phone ring, and had almost convinced himself to drive out to the Medallion Street Precinct to find out what was happening.

"Well?"

"Well my ass," Forebridge said. "You ever tire of being right?"

"Kyle confess?"

"He tried to be a hard case for about two minutes. Then I asked him how he knew Francine had been struck on the back of the head, when that fact was kept out of the newspapers. Little punk just about wet his pants. We got the whole story. I guess you can come over and get Alexander. He'll be needing a ride home."

It had been Kyle, not Rodney, who had followed Francine into the basement. Bull got the details from Forebridge over steaks and beer at a cop hangout a block and a half from the precinct.

Kyle had been after Francine to be his girlfriend, but she kept turning him down. When she'd offered herself to Rodney right outside Kyle's apartment, he'd heard her and gotten really angry. He claimed he hadn't meant to kill her. He confronted her in the basement. She told him to screw himself. The pipe was there; he'd picked it up.

That explained Chet's question on why it had taken Kyle so long to tell his homeboys what he supposedly saw. It was a bone thrown at them after the cops had arrested Rodney. He'd been smart enough to try to keep the focus on Rodney and away from himself, which had worked.

It proved Bull's instincts were still intact. Everything pointed to Rodney being guilty. Common sense alone added up that way. Yet, something deep within him couldn't grab hold to that being true.

"If'n it walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck . . . sometimes it's a chicken in drag," Sam often joked. It was his way of saying that sometimes two and two didn't make four.

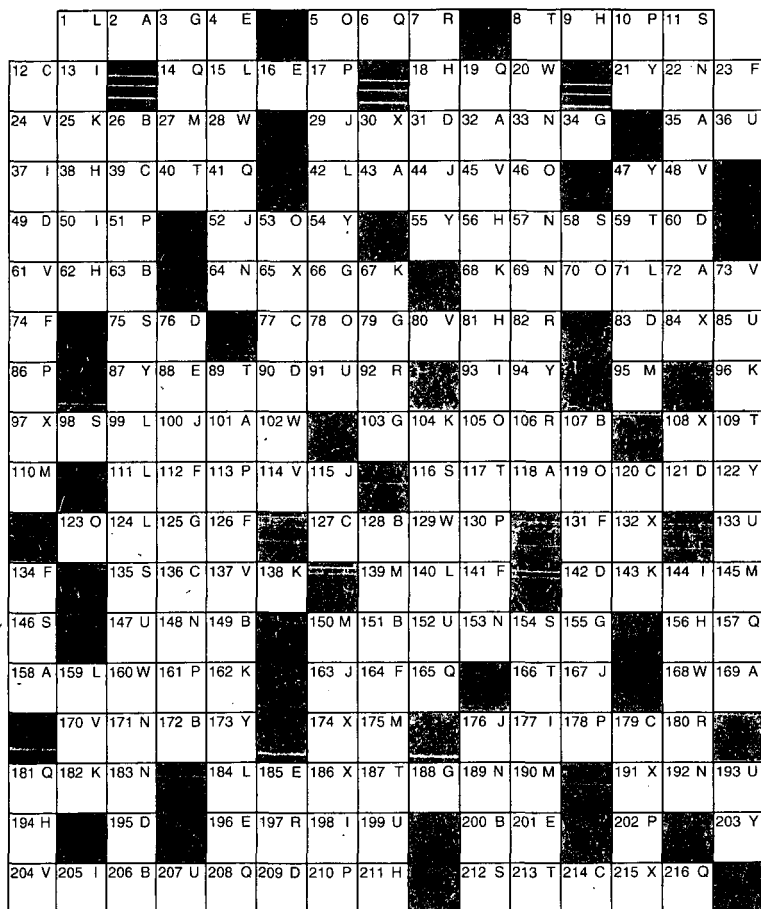
Well, two and two hadn't made four this time. Maybe Sam had been there all along, whispering in his ear. 🐦

DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



Directions for solving are on page 31. The solution will appear in the January/February issue. The solution to the November puzzle is on page 128.



DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. Pluto, in 1930

32 118 169 101 43 35 72 2 158

B. Rise

128 172 151 206 200 26 107 149 63

C. Sobriquet

136 39 77 179 12 214 127 120

D. Land-water vehicle	<u>83</u>	<u>209</u>	<u>90</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>121</u>	<u>142</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>195</u>	<u>76</u>	<u>49</u>
E. Billy Crystal and Whoopi Goldberg, at times	<u>185</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>196</u>	<u>88</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>201</u>				
F. "The Snake Charmer" artist	<u>112</u>	<u>131</u>	<u>164</u>	<u>74</u>	<u>134</u>	<u>126</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>141</u>		
G. Cooling device	<u>125</u>	<u>103</u>	<u>155</u>	<u>188</u>	<u>66</u>	<u>79</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>34</u>		
H. Medical specialist	<u>56</u>	<u>211</u>	<u>38</u>	<u>81</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>156</u>	<u>194</u>	<u>62</u>	
I. Sharp-beaked bird	<u>205</u>	<u>144</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>93</u>	<u>198</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>177</u>		
J. Bad advice: 2 wds.	<u>163</u>	<u>44</u>	<u>29</u>	<u>176</u>	<u>167</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>115</u>	<u>52</u>		
K. Young couple's pursuit, perhaps	<u>143</u>	<u>138</u>	<u>67</u>	<u>162</u>	<u>104</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>182</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>96</u>	
L. Extemporaneously: 3 wds.	<u>140</u>	<u>99</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>159</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>71</u>	<u>111</u>	<u>124</u>	<u>184</u>	<u>1</u>
M. Bogart-Bacall hit: 2 wds.	<u>150</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>139</u>	<u>145</u>	<u>95</u>	<u>110</u>	<u>190</u>	<u>175</u>		
N. Mild Swiss cheese	<u>148</u>	<u>22</u>	<u>64</u>	<u>33</u>	<u>189</u>	<u>69</u>	<u>192</u>	<u>171</u>		
								<u>153</u>	<u>183</u>	<u>57</u>
O. Fragments of rock	<u>46</u>	<u>105</u>	<u>119</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>78</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>53</u>	<u>123</u>		
P. Rosalind Russell role: 2 wds.	<u>178</u>	<u>210</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>130</u>	<u>113</u>	<u>86</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>202</u>	<u>161</u>	<u>51</u>
Q. 1959 Hitchcock title word	<u>157</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>208</u>	<u>165</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>216</u>	<u>41</u>	<u>181</u>	
R. Poses an alibi	<u>92</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>106</u>	<u>197</u>	<u>180</u>	<u>82</u>				
S. Hot spot: 2 wds.	<u>212</u>	<u>75</u>	<u>116</u>	<u>146</u>	<u>154</u>	<u>98</u>	<u>135</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>58</u>	
T. Grapevine: 2 wds.	<u>117</u>	<u>59</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>109</u>	<u>89</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>166</u>	<u>187</u>	<u>213</u>	
U. Scholastic group: 2 wds.	<u>36</u>	<u>85</u>	<u>199</u>	<u>152</u>	<u>207</u>	<u>193</u>	<u>147</u>	<u>133</u>	<u>91</u>	
V. City on the Trent	<u>48</u>	<u>137</u>	<u>73</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>80</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>170</u>	<u>204</u>	<u>114</u>
W. Straightens up	<u>102</u>	<u>168</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>160</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>129</u>				
X. Bring about	<u>65</u>	<u>108</u>	<u>132</u>	<u>97</u>	<u>215</u>	<u>191</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>84</u>	<u>174</u>	<u>186</u>
Y. Shrugged off	<u>173</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>122</u>	<u>55</u>	<u>47</u>	<u>87</u>	<u>94</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>203</u>	

DEATH BY DEVIL'S TURNIPS

KATHY LYNN EMERSON

CANDLETHORPE, NORTHAMPTONSHIRE. JUNE, 1577

"Good day to you, Sir Edmund," said Susanna, Lady Appleton. "Not good at all, Lady Appleton," Sir Edmund Brudenell replied. "Three women are dead and I do much fear I am to blame."

Susanna exchanged a quick, startled glance with Nick Baldwin, whose houseguest she was, before her assessing gaze returned to Sir Edmund. The slump of his shoulders and a bleak expression accentuated the careworn look in his eyes.

"Is this a confession of murder, Sir Edmund?"

Her blunt question surprised him into a bark of rueful laughter. "What a to-do that would cause!"

"Because you have for so long been a justice of the peace in these parts?"

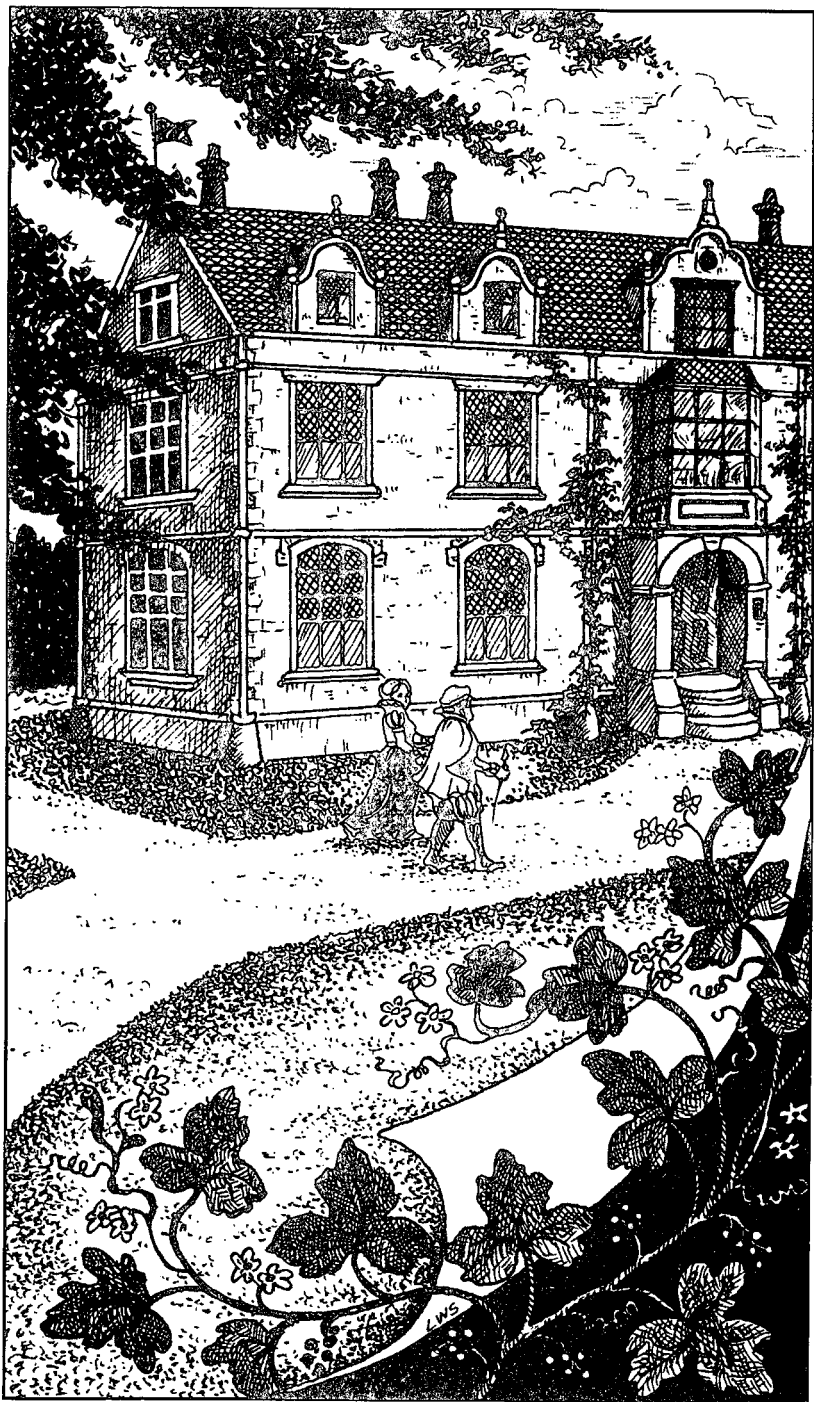
"Not only that. This year I am also high sheriff."

Nick gestured toward the Glastonbury chair he'd vacated when Brudenell arrived. "Sit, Sir Edmund, and tell us what you want of us."

"We are private here?"

"As you see." The upper parlor at Candlethorpe was a bright, open room comfortably furnished and well-warmed by morning sun streaming in through east-facing windows. As Brudenell lowered himself into the chair, Nick pulled a bench closer for himself. Susanna remained where she was on the cushioned window seat, the book on her lap forgotten. With one hand she idly stroked Greymalkin, the cat curled up at her side.

She'd first met Sir Edmund Brudenell the previous autumn on her last visit to Northamptonshire. He was a well-to-do country gentleman, Nick's neighbor at Deene Park. An active life with plenty to eat and no chance encounters with deadly diseases or



unsheathed blades had left him with the appearance of rough good health. Only the presence of deep creases in his ruddy face and a slight paunch betrayed that he had reached the middle of his sixth decade.

"May we offer you ale?" Susanna asked. "Barley water? Wine?"

"Nothing but your indulgence while I tell my tale. You did much impress me last year, madam, with your ability to solve puzzles and sort out truth from lies. I have need of those skills in this present crisis."

"You said three women are dead?"

The fingers of his right hand curled around the arm of the chair, gripping the knob at the end so tightly that his knuckles turned white. "Aye, and fool that I am, I did not see the connection until the third death. Early this morning the body of a young woman named Maud Hertford, a servant in my household, was found in Prior's Coppice, a remote section of my estate."

"What killed her?" Nick asked.

"She was found lying next to a flowering vine, a few berries still clutched in her hand and more in her mouth. I am reliably informed, by Dr. Roydon of Gretton, that the plant is called the devil's turnip and is surpassing poisonous."

Susanna felt her whole body tense. No wonder Sir Edmund had come to her. He wanted to tap into her extensive knowledge of deadly herbs. She would help him, certes, if she could, but she more than anyone knew how little accurate information anyone possessed about the properties of plants. The herbals she'd studied were full of contradictions.

"I have ruled her death an accident," Brudenell continued, the ironic twist of his lips giving the lie to that verdict. "I had no choice."

"The plant's proper name is bryony and just one berry would have burned her mouth. More would have blistered her throat and brought on nausea and vomiting. They are filled with bitter-tasting juice that has an acrid, unpleasant odor."

"Not self-murder, then," Nick said. Like Brudenell, he was a justice of the peace, accustomed to presiding over cases of unexplained death.

"No," Susanna agreed. "And to ingest a fatal dose she must have eaten a great many of the berries. Forty, perhaps fifty." She could not contain a shiver. "Were the other victims also poisoned?"

"They may have been, though there was no clear sign of it. A woman named Faintnot Blaisdell died in Rockingham six days ago, the baker's wife. The cause was writ down as planetstruck, her

death the result of a seizure. Two weeks before that, Mistress Barbara Ratsey died alone in her lodgings in Kettering. By the time her body was discovered, no one could say what caused her death."

"Does something link these three women together, Sir Edmund?" Susanna had a suspicion but wanted it confirmed.

"I do. Two were former mistresses. The third shared my bed the night before she died." He sounded defensive, as well he should.

Susanna had to fight not to betray her distaste. If a man had to commit adultery, the least he could do was keep his light-o'-loves at a distance from his wife.

Sir Edmund glanced at Nick but found no support there. He returned his gaze to Susanna. "I believe the murderer's intent is to cause me pain and loss. If I have the right of it, killing Lady Brudenell would strike the hardest blow. Lady Appleton, I want your help to protect her."

Incredulous, Susanna stared at him. From what Nick's housekeeper had told her about the Brudenells, Sir Edmund and Dame Agnes had been estranged for years. This sudden concern for his neglected spouse did not ring true.

"What about other mistresses?" Nick demanded. "Have you no fears for their safety?"

"The three who are now dead were the most recent. No others need concern you."

"How recent?" Involuntarily, Susanna's hand clenched in the cat's fur. Offended, Greymalkin stalked off.

"The woman in Rockingham was my mistress five years ago. I'd not seen the one in Kettering for months, though she still lived there at my expense. Maud Hertford was a milkmaid at Deene Park. She'd warmed my bed, on and off, since mid-winter."

"A means to scratch the occasional itch?" Disapproval writ large on his face, Nick failed to keep the contempt out of his voice.

A defiant undercurrent flowed through Brudenell's reply. "I was fond of all of them and treated them well."

"It is generally known you are not so fond of Dame Agnes," Susanna said. "Why suppose anyone would seek to strike at you by harming her?"

For a moment, before he regained control of his emotions, Sir Edmund's eyes blazed with the heat of anger but cold words followed. "If I lose her, Lady Appleton, I lose half my wealth. She has given me no heir. When she dies, her male relatives will challenge my claim to the estates that came to me when we wed, seven fine manors in Lincolnshire, Derbyshire, and Rutland. That being the case, I have every reason to hope Agnes lives a long, long life."

"Assuming your conclusion that Dame Agnes is in danger is correct, what do you think I can do to keep her safe?"

"You know poisons."

"I know how easily they can be slipped into an innocent dish. You need a food taster, Sir Edmund, not an herbalist."

"You might notice something others would miss. A distinctive smell. A wrong texture."

Susanna could feel herself weakening. If a life was at risk, how could she not try to help? "In order to be of any use, I would have to stay at Deene Park."

"Nothing simpler to arrange. As it happens, Agnes has already invited a troupe of strolling players to perform for us this evening. You will both join us as my guests, and as it will be late before the entertainment is done, what more natural than to offer you a night's lodging?"

"A journey of less than two miles separates Candlethorpe and Deene Park," Nick reminded him.

"A gentlewoman cannot be expected to travel even that distance after midnight." He bestowed a smug smile on Susanna. "I am certain I can trust you, Lady Appleton, to contrive a way to extend your visit."

Dame Agnes, accompanied by a maidservant, was walking in the gardens at Deene Park when Susanna and Nick arrived at mid-afternoon the following day. They had made a brief detour to inspect Prior's Coppice, the scene of Maud Hertford's demise. The plant had indeed been bryony.

Dame Agnes turned at the sound of voices, but the sour expression on her face offered neither warmth nor welcome. A wizened little woman a few years younger than her husband, she used a walking stick to get about. From the way she moved, Susanna guessed that her knees pained her. The maid, by contrast, was a sturdily built countrywoman, plain and pale of face with a wealth of thick black hair stuffed under her cap. She paused a few steps behind her mistress and kept her eyes lowered, but Susanna had the sense that her ears were stretched to catch every word uttered by her betters.

"We will leave you to your flowers," Sir Edmund declared when he had performed introductions, whereupon he and Nick beat a hasty retreat.

An uneasy silence descended. Dame Agnes seemed to be waiting for Susanna to speak first, but Susanna had not the slightest idea what to say to her. The bald announcement that Dame

Agnes's life was in danger would entail too many explanations.

Was the woman aware of her husband's infidelities? Susanna assumed she was and would prefer not to have them pointed out to her. She remembered well the agony of knowing that her own husband, the late Sir Robert Appleton, had repeatedly betrayed his marriage vows. Like most women in that situation, Susanna had, for the most part, pretended ignorance.

As Dame Agnes slowly resumed her perambulation of the garden, Susanna realized something else—Sir Edmund had overlooked one obvious suspect. A wife who had finally had enough of his unfaithfulness might well be capable of taking revenge by killing her husband's mistresses.

Dame Agnes paused beside a plant Susanna recognized, though its flowering time was already past. "Cowslip," she said. "Some women sprinkle the blossoms with white wine and afterward distill the mixture to make a wash for their faces." Her pursed lips and narrowed eyes made clear her distaste for this practice. "This cowslip wine is said 'to drive wrinkles away, and to make them fair in the eyes of the world rather than in the eyes of God, whom they are not afraid to offend with the sluttishness, filthiness, and foulness of the soul.' Do you hold with such vanity, Lady Appleton?"

For one slow blink, Susanna maintained her silence. She recognized both the words and the sentiment, but was uncertain why Dame Agnes had chosen to quote that particular passage from Master William Turner's *Herbal*. An expression of her religious beliefs? A test of Susanna's? Or an outright accusation of immorality? She would not be the first to judge Susanna and Nick for their decision not to marry. Careful to keep her voice level, she replied, "I would use a distillation of cowslips to cleanse unhealthy eruptions from the skin."

"A wise answer." Dame Agnes squinted at Susanna. After a long, careful scrutiny, both her voice and her manner softened. "You are older than I expected."

Too old, did she mean, to be a rival for Sir Edmund's attention?

"I have spent many of those years in the study of herbs," Susanna said, "and had the great good fortune, as a young woman, to be acquainted with Master Turner."

Dame Agnes mellowed visibly, her thin lips very nearly curving into a smile. "He was a godly man," Dame Agnes said. "I own other herbals but suspect those written by Papists."

"The ancients are worthy teachers. *De Materia Medica* is more than fifteen hundred years old, but it lists over five hundred plants, with illustrations. I find it most useful."

"You read Latin?" At Susanna's nod, Dame Agnes beamed. "I have acquired a copy of Master Matthias de L'Obel's *Stirpium adversaria nova*, but when I wish to consult it I am obliged to wait until my husband or my chaplain or my cousin Richard has time to translate for me."

"I am at your service, Dame Agnes. Is there some particular herb you wished to study?"

"Indeed there is." Limping noticeably now, she led the way into the house. "It is called the devil's turnip."

Susanna scurried after her. "Bryony? Why that one?"

Her hostess began a slow ascent of the main staircase, her bad knees obliging her to climb sideways, settling the upper leg firmly on the tread before she brought the lower up to join it. "One of the servants, a foolish girl, poisoned herself by eating of the berries. I wish to know how to avoid future . . . accidents."

It was reasonable she would know what had caused Maud Hertford's death, Susanna supposed. The dead woman *had* been part of her household. Dame Agnes's interest in the plant was also natural enough, for in rural areas where physicians were a rarity it was left to the lady of the manor to maintain a stillroom and provide remedies to those who were sick or injured.

When they reached her bedchamber, Dame Agnes sent her maidservant to fetch the herbals. "Before Judith returns," she said to Susanna, "I've a question for you. Do you mean to set things right by marrying Master Baldwin?"

Her grimace rueful, Susanna settled herself in a welter of skirts on a low, wide stool. "I have no plan to remarry at all, but set your fears at rest. Master Baldwin's housekeeper is in residence. There is nothing improper about my stay at Candlethorpe. I am in Northamptonshire to visit my goddaughter."

"Goddaughter?" Dame Agnes could hide neither her surprise nor her curiosity. She inched her own stool closer to that of her guest.

"A young girl named Susanna Johnson. She is five years old and has a lively intelligence. I have long had an interest in education for girls. I hope to provide her with a tutor before I return to Kent."

"Where is her mother?"

"She lives in a cottage on the Candlethorpe estate. Alas, poor creature, she is simpleminded, but she has a good heart. Indeed, she once saved my life."

Dame Agnes looked thoughtful. "So, you are not Nick Baldwin's mistress?"

"We are neighbors in Kent, and friends. I do not share his bed." That he, now and again, shared hers was no one's business but their own.

"Tongues will wag as long as you stay at Candlethorpe, house-keeper or no," Dame Agnes said.

"It is human nature to believe the worst of others."

"I'll not have it," Dame Agnes declared with the air of a woman coming to a momentous decision. "Not when there is a simple way to silence the gossips. You will stay here for the remainder of your visit to Northamptonshire. It will be easy enough for you to visit young Susanna from Deene Park and the child may come to you, as well. I like children and I share your interest in educating them. I have taken in any number of young cousins over the years."

"If you are certain it will be no trouble . . ."

"None at all." A pleased expression on her wrinkled face, Dame Agnes turned at the sound of heavy footsteps. Weighed down by massive tomes, Judith had returned.

While Susanna perused Master L'Obel's work, Dame Agnes consulted Master Turner's *Herbal*, which was written in English. "He says that bryony, when laid to with salt, does much relieve old, festering, rotten, and consuming sores of the legs because its properties scour away and dry moist humours. The leaves and roots have a sharp and biting nature. He makes no mention of the fact that the berries can kill."

Engrossed in L'Obel's book, which had been published nearly ten years after her own little volume on poisonous plants, Susanna acknowledged Dame Agnes's information with an absent nod.

"My cousin Richard was good enough to put into English a part of Master L'Obel's explanation of his system for the classification of plants," Dame Agnes said after a moment. "I found it passing clever."

"To develop some means of grouping flora is an excellent notion," Susanna agreed, "although I am not convinced that arranging plants according to the characteristics of their leaves is the best method." L'Obel lumped together clover, wood sorrel, and herb trinity, three plants that had little in common but the number and shape of their leaves.

"What does he say of bryony?"

"That there are at least two distinct varieties, both poisonous. Both black and white bryony are rampant twining and climbing plants. They send forth long tender branches with rough vine-like leaves and greenish-white flowers. The berries form in clusters and when ripe are red in color."

"Are these berries sweet, to tempt the unwary?"

"No. They have a foul scent and a loathsome taste."

"Then how could that foolish girl eat so many of them that she died?"

Susanna had no answer for her, nor did she understand why Maud Hertford had been found right next to the plant. It should have taken her several long, agonizing hours to die and yet there had been no signs of illness or violent death throes in Prior's Coppice. The last resting place of the body was a mere indentation in the forest floor, in appearance as peaceful as the hollow left by a sleeping fawn.

"How do herbalists know how poison tastes?" Dame Agnes asked. "I should think that to experiment would prove fatal."

"They rely upon hearsay." And often, she silently acknowledged, hearsay was wrong. She had herself once believed all forms of bryony had black roots, thus providing a simple way to tell them apart from turnips, which they did much resemble in shape. Now she knew better. Only the root of black bryony was black. That of white bryony was white, making the devil's turnips much harder to distinguish from their benign cousins.

"Can all parts of the plant kill?" Dame Agnes asked. Judith, who had made herself all but invisible in a corner, stirred uneasily at the question.

"Yes," Susanna told them, "and neither cooking nor drying kills the poison."

"Is there an antidote?"

"No certain one. Some say galls counteract the effects. And if the victim can be made to vomit up what he has eaten, then there is a chance of survival."

"Did you read all that in there?" Dame Agnes indicated L'Obel's book.

Susanna did not hesitate to lie. "Yes." Closing the volume with a snap, she added, "If your wish is to avoid a repetition of today's fatal accident, then take your entire household out to Prior's Coppice and show them the plant."

Again there was a rustle of fabric from Judith's direction.

"Pull it up and display the roots," Susanna advised, "that all may know what they look like, but have a care to wear gloves. Even the whitish liquid that seeps out of the stem is a most terrible irritant and can cause a rash."

Supper provided an opportunity for Susanna to meet the rest of the household. She went prepared with names and backgrounds Nick had supplied and began by considering them all suspects in the poisonings.

Dame Agnes seated her mother, Lady Neville, on one side of Susanna and put Nick on the other. An older, stouter, healthier

version of her daughter, Lady Neville regarded Susanna with skepticism when Dame Agnes informed her that they shared a number of common interests, the study of herbs and the education of girls among them.

"I would like to found a school one day," Dame Agnes added.

"Waste of money," Sir Edmund grumbled, but he subsided when all three women glared at him.

Lady Neville was twice a widow. By her first husband, John Bussy, she'd had but one child, Agnes. She'd given Sir Anthony Neville none and thus been left dependent when he died upon the good graces of her son-in-law.

Two of Lady Brudenell's cousins were also present. Anthony Mears was a sour-faced individual considerably younger than the rest of the company. The other was Richard Topcliffe of Somerby—the Richard, Susanna assumed, who had translated parts of L'Obel's book for his cousin. He was doubly connected to the family. His sister was married to Sir Edmund's younger brother.

The final guest was a gaunt individual relegated to one end of the high table, Dr. Roydon of Gretton, the physician who had examined Maud Hertford's body. Long-winded and opinionated, he seemed determined to deliver a lecture on the four humours as they related to diet. "Too much red meat can produce a harmful superfluity of gross blood in those of a sanguine disposition," he declared, "and avoid raw fruit and raw herbs, whatsoever they be, as well as those that be roasted, boiled, or parboiled."

"What is safe to eat, then?" asked Lady Neville in an irritated voice.

"A little marmalade can comfort the stomach. And warm and moist foods such as chicken and almonds are the most temperate, closely akin to the ideal humoural state. You may also eat stewed capon, madam, and broth made from the bones, and other types of poultry. But fish, because they live in water, are naturally phlegmatic and hard to digest unless your cook takes great pains to dry them out."

"That man should not be allowed in a sickroom," Lady Neville grumbled as she turned back to her trencher and selected a succulent bit of trout.

"Is he the only trained medical man hereabout?"

"Trained? Hah! My daughter may swear by him, but I say he's no better than the most uneducated quack."

"He did not study at university?"

"If he did it must have been one of those foreign places. Terrible, they are. Turn out naught but Papists."

"The doctor is a recusant?"

This was dangerous ground and Susanna was reluctant to pursue it, but she could not discount the possibility that religion—and treason—might be at the root of the three deaths. She prayed they were not. Dealing with jealousy or greed or revenge was much simpler.

Overhearing the words Papist and recusant, Master Topcliffe, who was seated on the other side of Lady Neville, let loose a stream of venom against all Catholics. He fair seethed when he talked of rooting out traitors in their midst.

"Moderation, Richard," warned Sir Edmund Brudenell. Roydon had abruptly fallen silent and now applied himself to his meal.

Topcliffe's glare suggested he believed even his host might have Papist sympathies, and it was obvious that he violently opposed letting any vestige of Catholicism remain in England. "The Queen's loyal servants cannot sit back and do nothing," he argued. "The Pope is like a great spider, spinning his web everywhere."

Susanna suppressed a sigh. This household, like so many others in the Midlands and North, appeared to be divided by religious differences. Ever since Pope Pius V's excommunication of Queen Elizabeth several years earlier, those loyal Catholics remaining among her subjects had been encouraged to rebel against her. There were many who were not averse to freeing Mary of Scotland from captivity in Derbyshire and putting her on the throne of England in Elizabeth's place. As a result, there was also increasing pressure among the more radical Protestants to report to the authorities anyone who refused to conform to the "new" religion.

But was there cause for murder in that? As Topcliffe railed on, she studied the others. Only one face betrayed wholehearted agreement with his extreme views—Lady Neville's companion. Seated at the table just below the dais, this tall, angular, middle-aged female, Ursula Ratsey by name, listened with rapt attention, nodding at each particular point.

Susanna frowned. The dead woman in Kettering had been a Mistress Barbara Ratsey. Kin to Ursula? She made a mental note to ask Sir Edmund at the first opportunity.

It came as a relief when supper was finally over and the players were called in.

"Lord Derby's Men," Lady Neville whispered as they commenced a performance of *The Wandering Knight*.

The play proved moderately amusing, having little substance and a fair amount of bawdy humor. It also had a dragon made of brown paper.

"I've seen better at a fair," scoffed young Anthony Mears. His

voice, overloud, betrayed an inordinate consumption of wine.

Lady Neville gave a contemptuous snort. "Young lout! Mark my words, he'll come to a bad end. It is in the blood." At Susanna's lifted brow, she leaned closer and lowered her voice. "His grandmother was a murderer."

Could it be that simple? Susanna doubted it, but she encouraged Lady Neville's garrulous confidences all the same.

"Jane Bussy was my late husband's aunt," she said. "He told me she killed a man. Had to be pardoned by old King Henry VIII."

But when pressed for details, Lady Neville knew little more than that, leaving Susanna inclined to consider her comments naught but the mean-spirited rambling of a bitter old woman.

Still, she kept her eye on Anthony Mears.

"These cousins," Susanna whispered to Nick, who now sat behind her, "are they the male relatives Sir Edmund spoke of? The ones who stand to inherit if Dame Agnes dies?"

He nodded. "They and one other, John Bussy by name."

Their eyes met and Susanna knew he was thinking the same thing she was: that the three deaths might have been naught but preparation for the murder of the real target. Was Richard Topcliffe capable of such vileness? Was Anthony Mears? Near the end of the play, when the hero of the piece would have slain the dragon, Mears staggered forward, now much the worse for drink, and ran his dagger through the paper, very nearly skewering the player beneath.

"Sit down, Anthony!" Sir Edmund bellowed. "Damned spooney."

Susanna glanced at Nick for a translation.

"A man so drunk he's disgusting," Nick whispered in her ear. Mears was assuredly that! She watched him stumble out, no doubt in search of the privy. Dr. Roydon went after him. Neither returned.

The next morning Nick and Susanna left Deene Park with the excuse that Susanna must return to Candlethorpe to assure her goddaughter that she had not abandoned her. In truth they rode to Rockingham, a distance of some three miles through woodlands in which oaks and beeches predominated.

They found Baker Blaisdell in the shop next to his bakehouse. Nick spun a convoluted tale for his benefit, pretending to be investigating the possibility that Goodwife Blaisdell's death had been caused by venison obtained in violation of forest law. No one but the king could hunt animals "of the chase" unless he had purchased a special license, though in practice the inhabitants of for-

est villages had special privileges and liberties within the wooded areas, and a local landowner's right to make inquiries would not be questioned.

Nick ended his explanation with the suggestion that the baker's wife might have eaten the tainted meat of a red deer from the forest.

Blaisdell's eyes narrowed. "*Red* deer? There be nowt but fallow deer in Rockingham."

Nick covered his blunder with assumed arrogance. "Meat is meat. Had she eaten any?"

"Faintnot were ta'en in a planet," Blaisdell insisted. Planetstruck, as Brudenell had said—dead of a sudden, unexplained fit.

The woman's given name suggested that her parents had been advocates of a purer church—plain vestments, no music, even the abolishment of bells. So, it seemed, was Blaisdell. When he launched into a diatribe on the will of God, Susanna slipped outside to inspect the area for flowering vines, but there was no bryony growing nearby.

It occurred to Susanna that bryony could have been ingested in a number of other ways. Women sometimes took the expressed juice of the fresh root mixed with white wine to bring down their courses, though most midwives knew that too much of the medicine could kill and were careful to dispense only tiny amounts. In addition, both fresh and dried roots were used in medicine—in a posset bryony was said to cure shortness of breath. According to the herbals Susanna had studied, fresh roots were collected in autumn and powdered. In that form, she wondered, did bryony lose some of its odor? Enough to allow it to be added to food . . . or baked into a loaf of bread?

She had reached the bakehouse. Inside, a gangly, bored-looking apprentice stood in a clean corner shaking flour through a piece of course canvas to remove the bran. As soon as an appreciable amount had collected, another lad swept it up with a small broom and a goosewing and took it to be mixed with salt, yeast, and water in a long wooden trough large enough so that two more apprentices could knead the dough using their feet.

A journeyman baker stood at a long table weighing dough that had already been worked into loaves. He sent Susanna a questioning look but did not stop work. By law, bread had to weigh a certain amount both going into and coming out of the oven. Bakers who failed to comply faced public humiliation as well as fines. When he'd finished weighing the loaves, he marked each one with a skewer and left them to rise, then strode to the large beehive-shaped oven, broke open the oven door, which had been sealed in

place with daub, and used a long wooden peel to remove freshly baked bread through the small rectangular opening.

"Is all your bread the same?" Susanna asked when the hot loaves had been safely deposited in racks to cool. "I mean the same ingredients. Do you, for example, sometimes add herbs for flavor? Rosemary, or basil, or garlic?"

"Yarbs?" he repeated, giving the word the local pronunciation. "Aye. Mistress were fond of such." He looked away, as if trying not to let his emotions show. "Master weren't to know."

"Did you bake a special loaf for her that last day?"

He nodded and admitted, under Susanna's gentle questioning, that Goodwife Blaisdell had given him a dried powdered root to knead into the dough. She'd not told him what it was and he hadn't questioned her. Neither had he noticed any odd odor—scarce surprising when the smells of wood fire and baking bread were so strong.

The apprentice who had kneaded the bread had not noticed anything unusual either, and since his feet were swathed, the bryony would not have reached his skin to cause a rash.

More questions, subtle and not so subtle, yielded no further information. Susanna could see for herself that the apprentices would not have noticed much beyond their own exhaustion. They were kept busy every moment heaving sacks of flour, feeding the fire in one oven, clearing the ashes out of another—the baker sold them to make lye—kneading dough, and scouring the trough after each batch came out.

Susanna returned to Blaisdell's shop convinced that someone had provided Goodwife Blaisdell with powdered bryony root and persuaded her it would cure some ailment that afflicted her if she ate it baked in bread. She tried to question the widower about the state of his late wife's health but Nick's interrogation had already exhausted his patience.

"'Twere her time to be ta'en!" he bellowed, and threw them out of his shop.

"Do you suppose he knew he'd been cuckolded?" Susanna asked as she and Nick rode away from Rockingham. "Could he have exacted vengeance upon her and then set out to punish Brudenell by killing the others?"

"The timing's wrong," Nick reminded her. "Five years ago he was not yet married. Besides, the woman in Kettering died two weeks before his wife did."

Nick went on to repeat everything Blaisdell had told him about

Faintnot's final hours. Susanna sat up a little straighter in her saddle when she heard that Goodwife Blaisdell *had* suffered from shortness of breath. "The local cunning woman told her there was naught she could do to relieve the condition," Nick reported, "or so Blaisdell says."

"Do you suppose she consulted Dr. Roydon? Is Gretton nearby?"

"A mile or so from Rockingham."

"A pity I had no opportunity to speak with Roydon last night. He took the first opportunity to get away from Richard Topcliffe's sermonizing. *Is he sympathetic to Rome?*"

"Who can say?" Nick leveled a warning look in her direction. "In these troubled times, it is not wise to ask."

They met Sir Edmund Brudenell by arrangement beside the Eleanor Cross in Geddington, a village two miles north of Kettering. As they continued on together to the place where the first victim had died, he listened to their account of the visit to Rockingham. "This is a waste of time," he insisted with ill-disguised irritation. "My wife is in danger. You should be at her side."

"I cannot help Dame Agnes if I do not discover all there is to know about the earlier deaths. Tell me, was Barbara Ratsey kin to Lady Neville's companion?"

"Distant cousin by marriage. Barbara was a widow."

"Was Ursula Ratsey aware that Barbara was your mistress?"

"I do much doubt it. They did not speak. A difference of opinion on a matter of religion."

Religion again! Susanna dearly hoped there was no motivation for murder there, but she did not discount the possibility. "Your wife's cousin Topcliffe supports radical reform. Does your wife?"

"All the family does. That was part of the reason I stopped visiting Barbara. To have Topcliffe find out about her . . ." Suddenly he gave a bark of laughter. "Too much to hope he is our murderer! Still, there is a nice symmetry to it—eliminate one or two Catholic sympathizers and lay claim to the Bussy inheritance, all in one fell swoop."

Brudenell had paid for Mistress Ratsey's lodgings for the entire year. No one had disturbed anything in the three upstairs rooms since the body had been removed. "Her personal belongings should have gone to a nephew, but he is currently abroad." Brudenell hesitated, then admitted he was at the English college at Douai.

Another Catholic! Susanna exchanged a worried glance with

Nick. Douai trained missionaries, sending them back to their native land to encourage recusants to celebrate Mass in defiance of the law.

Nick threw open the window shutters, letting in light and fresh air. It had been three weeks since Mistress Ratsey's death and no attempt had been made to clean the place afterward. Wrinkling her nose against sour smells, Susanna studied an abundance of furniture, luxuriously appointed. Atop an oaken table, she found the remains of a poultice, the wrappings still smelling faintly of bryony.

"There is your murder weapon," she told Sir Edmund. "Bryony poultices are beneficial to remove a thorn or mend a broken bone, but if this was applied to a wound or an open sore it would release a deadly poison into the body."

At the other end of the table, she found something else, a bit of spilled candlewax. In it, showing up with startling clarity, was the imprint of a hand. When the wax had still been warm, someone had leaned on that spot, leaving an impression of the heel of a large hand, a thumb, and two long, thick fingers.

"Sir Edmund, did Mistress Ratsey have large hands or small?"

"Very small." She pointed out the spilled wax and he squinted at it, then held his own hand above the impression. "Smaller than this, of that I am certain."

"Then this imprint may have been left by her murderer, a killer so intent upon instructing Mistress Ratsey in the preparation of the poultice that he did not realize he was leaving evidence of his presence behind."

Dr. Roydon? Brudenell himself? Another, newer lover?

A spot on the heel seemed to hint at a callus—someone who worked without gloves. But Susanna's gaze kept returning to the thumbprint. Thoughtfully, she studied the pattern of whorls and lines preserved in the wax. She lifted her own hand and studied her fingers, noting both similarities and differences. Was it possible these ridges, spirals, and loops could be analyzed and categorized like L'Obel's leaves? There did seem to be distinct patterns.

"Nick, show me your thumb."

His markings were not the same as her own, nor did they match those on the table. Once again her thoughts leapt to L'Obel's theory about families of plants. If certain characteristic patterns ran in families, might they not be able to narrow down their list of suspects?

Taking her little eating knife, Susanna carefully pried up the wax and wrapped it in a cloth Nick found in one of Mistress Ratsey's chests. As she worked, she shared her thoughts with Nick and Sir Edmund. "If I can make wax impressions of the thumbs of all

those we suspect of killing these women, I may be able to match one of them to this."

"How will that prove him a murderer? More than one person must have the same pattern. And no doubt the lines in fingers change with time, as those in faces do."

"I am not so certain of that, Sir Edmund," Nick interjected. "You know I traveled to Persia some years ago. There all documents are impressed with thumbprints. I assumed the practice to be based on superstition, that the Persians believe personal contact with the paper it is written on makes a contract more binding, but it is possible officials also use the thumbprints to verify identity."

"Do you mean to say no two people's fingerprints are exactly alike? Such a thing seems impossible."

Susanna had to agree, and yet she was intrigued by the possibility.

Impatient to return to Deene Park and begin making wax impressions, she had to force herself to stay in Kettering long enough to conduct a thorough examination of the dead woman's rooms. She found nothing more to indicate how Barbara Ratsey had died or who had killed her, but did unearth a rosary hidden behind a panel in the wainscoted wall.

They arrived back at Deene Park to find the place in an uproar. "You must come at once, Lady Appleton." Eyes wide with panic, voice hoarse, Judith burst into the stableyard just as Susanna dismounted. She seized her arm with bruising force. "Summat is wrong with Lady Brudenell."

With Nick and Sir Edmund following close behind, Judith all but dragged Susanna into the house and up the stairs. They had reached Dame Agnes's bedchamber before Susanna was able to free herself from the other woman's ham-handed grip.

She was relieved to find Dame Agnes upright and in apparent good health. It was anger that showed in her expression, not fear, when she caught sight of her husband in the doorway. "Murderer!" she cried. "You knew I'd find that packet of gingerbread. You thought I'd eat it all, to deprive you of your favorite sweet. You tried to kill me!"

His face blanched at the accusation. Acting swiftly, Susanna closed the door, shutting both Brudenell and Nick out.

"What has happened?" she asked, turning to Dame Agnes.

Brudenell's wife thrust a small box full of thin, crisp, gingerbread wafers into her hands. "You saved my life, Lady Appleton. If I had not gone to take a look at the bryony plant in Prior's Coppe, I'd never have recognized the scent."

Susanna lifted a wafer to her nose. The smell of the devil's turnips was unmistakable.

"My husband tried to kill me," Dame Agnes said.

Susanna regarded the box in her hands, then slowly lifted her head and let her gaze linger on the closed door. She saw again the look on Brudenell's face. "I am not so certain of that. Where did this come from?"

"It was in the parlor. I assumed Edmund bought it on one of his trips to Kettering. We are both fond of—" She broke off, swaying. Judith caught her shoulders and eased her toward the bed.

"You had best lie down," Susanna said. "You've had a shock."

Bitter words issued from beyond the bed hangings. "Oh, yes. A shock. That mine own husband should want me dead. That is a shock indeed. He hates me. He has for years. Now he's doubtless found someone else he wants to marry. That's it. I am certain of it. He wants me dead so he can take a new wife."

"You have no proof of that."

"He's not been a faithful husband all these years."

"That would be reason for you to kill him, not the other way around." Susanna stopped herself on the verge of telling Dame Agnes that three of those former mistresses were now dead of bryony poisoning.

Agnes shoved Judith aside—no mean feat with a lass as strong as that one!—and sat up against the bolster. "He wants me dead!"

"Does he profit if you die?"

Dame Agnes took stock, as Susanna had hoped she would. "Edmund might be free to remarry if I died, but he stands to lose a great fortune, the estates that came to him when we wed. I have three male cousins. Once I am dead, any one of them might take him to court to challenge his right to keep the manors I inherited from my father."

Two of those cousins were presently in residence at Deene Park. Susanna considered them in turn. Anthony Mears, the lad Dame Agnes referred to as her heir, was a bold, boasting fellow, loud and lewd, thoughtless and impulsive. Would he have had the patience to poison three women in the hope of making Dame Agnes's death look like just one more in a series of crimes? Was it proof of violent tendencies that he'd stabbed a brown paper dragon? Then there was Richard Topcliffe, self-styled "Queen's servant." He had never said precisely what it was he did in Royal service, but Susanna suspected he might be an intelligence gatherer, as own her late, unlamented husband had been. Topcliffe had a fiery temper and an obvious intolerance toward those faithful Catholics

who refused to compromise their faith by attending worship services conducted according to the *Book of Common Prayer*, but was he the sort of man who'd kill his own cousin for an inheritance?

When Dame Agnes finally submitted to Judith's ministrations and allowed herself to be put to bed, Susanna went in search of Nick and Sir Edmund. She located them in a room on the east of the courtyard. Brudenell stood with one hand braced against an elaborately carved and painted mantelpiece. As she approached him, Susanna saw that it bore the date 1571 and the motto *Amicus Fidelis Protexio Fortis*—a faithful friend is a strong bulwark.

"I knew this would happen if you went haring off and left my wife alone," Brudenell complained. "I brought you here to protect her."

"And so I did. She recognized the smell of bryony and did not eat of the gingerbread because of my warning. But you overlook one crucial fact, Sir Edmund. The gingerbread was not intended for Dame Agnes. It was meant for you."

Susanna produced the box, handing it first to Nick, then to Sir Edmund. "There is so much bryony in it that no one could miss the smell. Only a fool would eat of it. I do not believe your wife was the target," Susanna continued. "Nor were you meant to die. There are two explanations that make more sense. One is this—someone wants to frighten you into thinking your life is in danger."

"And the other?"

"You are meant to be charged with murder and attempted murder. You are the link between the three dead women. Your estrangement with your wife is widely known. What simpler solution than to arrest you?"

"And when conviction and execution follow," Nick murmured, "whoever is behind this will still have achieved the goal of Sir Edmund's death."

Sir Edmund scowled, fingering the seahorse crest on his signet ring. "Who would go to so much trouble? And why?"

"Someone who does not know you'd lose financially by Dame Agnes's death. Unless this is a diabolical plot by one of her cousins, I think we will find the answer in your own past. Have you enemies, Sir Edmund? Men who would like to see you dead? And what of those you've dealt with in the law? You have been a justice of the peace for many years. You have sent men to their deaths. A kinsman seeking revenge may be behind this."

"It takes two justices to condemn someone to die, and a trip to the Quarter Sessions or Assizes. I have not been solely responsible for any man's—" He broke off, a bemused look on his face. "There *was* a case, perhaps six years ago, after which a

member of the condemned man's family threatened my life."

"What were the circumstances?"

He thought for a moment. "A vagabond, Jasper Redborne by name, stole several horses and was hanged for it. He swore he had a twin who would avenge him and when, a few days after his execution, I found a cock, beheaded, in the center of my Great Hall, I suspected Redborne's brother had left it. Shortly after that I was accosted in an alley in Northampton. I'd have ended with my throat slit had the watch not come along and forced the fellow to flee."

"You're certain your attacker was Redborne's twin?" Nick asked.

"Oh, yes. He told me so. 'This is for Jasper,' he said, just as he was about to use his knife on me."

"Would you recognize him if you saw him again?" Susanna asked.

But Sir Edmund shook his head. "Never got a good look at him. He was muffled in a hooded cloak. He even spoke in a harsh whisper to disguise his voice. After that he vanished and since he did not trouble me again, I quite forgot the incident till now."

"If he was a twin, he'd look like Jasper Redborne," Nick said.

"Not necessarily," Susanna warned. "Not all twins are identical."

"And after all this time," Sir Edmund admitted, "I cannot remember what Redborne looked like. It would be easy enough to disguise even a familiar face by growing a beard or shaving one off."

"If this second Redborne is responsible for the poisonings," Susanna said, "then he has been here for a while, unrecognized. A stranger would not be able to leave a box of gingerbread in the house without someone noticing, nor would he know that Sir Edmund favored the sweet."

"How are we to unmask him?" Sir Edmund asked.

"With the help of the thumbprint we found at Mistress Ratsey's lodgings," Susanna said.

The next day, after Nick left for Northampton to search the court records of the trial of Jasper Redborne for clues, Susanna busied herself making wax impressions. She did not explain why she wanted them but since she started with the servants, no one questioned her until she'd worked her way up to Ursula Ratsey. Lady Neville's woman refused to let Susanna anywhere near her. Then Judith refused. Topcliffe looked at her askance and stalked out of the room. Doctor Roydon backed away muttering about witch's tricks and wax poppets.

"What ails him?" she wondered aloud as she pressed Lady Neville's thumb into warm wax.

"He says he encountered such things on the Continent." Her

eyes, avid with curiosity, contradicted the air of disinterest she tried to convey.

"When was he out of England?" Susanna asked. "I took him for a local man."

"Not by his speech. He settled in Gretton but two years past."

Armed with that knowledge and a new theory, Susanna sought out Sir Edmund. He had avoided her all day, and had not yet had his thumb impressed in wax.

"You must stop what you are doing," he told her, "or I will be obliged to charge you with witchcraft."

"I thought you wanted a killer brought to justice!"

"I want to prevent more deaths, but this is not helping." The desperate expression on his face gave her pause. He was more determined than she'd thought to avoid having his secrets come out.

"Sir Edmund, every print I've made has been different. That bodes well for our chances of identifying this villain by matching the lines on his thumb to those in the wax from Mistress Ratsey's lodgings. Two men have refused to cooperate. There is your wife's cousin Topcliffe—"

"A man who has influence with those who advise the Queen. A word from him could cause me all manner of trouble. Disgrace. Loss of position. He already suspects me of sympathizing with recusants."

In the last two years, the Queen's policy on dealing with recusancy had changed. Where once local officials had been in charge of enforcing attendance at church and fining those who missed Anglican services a shilling a week, now everyone was required to attend church or risk imprisonment. A census of recusants in each diocese had been ordered by the Privy Council. Those who continued to resist faced ever-increasing restrictions. If they were not actually put in gaol, they were made to post bonds to appear in court when summoned. They were also forbidden to have guests frequent their homes, lest they foment rebellion. Accusations, legitimate or otherwise, about Brudenell's conformity could cause him untold harm.

"I think it more likely Dr. Roydon is the culprit," Susanna said in a soothing voice. "Could he also be the twin who threatened you?"

Her suggestion startled Brudenell, but his initial look of surprise was quickly replaced by a pensive frown. "You truly believe the killer's thumbprint will match the impression you found?"

"I do. And if you will let me make an impression of your thumb, that will persuade everyone else that there is no harm in it."

"And if you find a match? How will you explain where you got that bit of wax to compare it to?"

"You are a justice of the peace and sheriff, Sir Edmund. You cannot let murder go unpunished simply to save yourself embarrassment. No one need know Barbara Ratsey was a recusant."

Defeat and resignation in his eyes, he conceded her point. "The entire household gathers to sup. There, before them all, I will allow you to make an impression of my thumb and urge anyone who has not yet complied to do so at once."

After supper, to the accompaniment of a great deal of grumbling and muttering, Susanna made impressions of Sir Edmund, Topcliffe, and Dr. Roydon. She compared each one to the wax impression she'd carefully preserved and brought back from Kettering . . . and *none* of them matched.

Roydon had been Susanna's chief suspect, the one most likely to be the twin who'd sworn to take revenge upon Sir Edmund. As she continued to make wax impressions, she heartily wished Nick would return from Northampton with more information. She was missing something obvious, but what?

And then, as she pressed Ursula's thumb into the wax, she belatedly realized that a twin could be a woman. Not Ursula. Her family history was well known. But someone at Deene Park. Someone whose presence she had overlooked.

"Judith next," she said, searching the Great Hall for Dame Agnes's maidservant.

"Go on, girl." Dame Agnes, impatient, shoved Judith toward the small table where Susanna sat with her dabs of wax.

Face gone pale as whey, Judith turned and fled, only to be caught by Nick, who had entered the hall unseen while Susanna was busy with Topcliffe and Roydon.

"Redborne's twin was a female," he said, studying Judith with intense interest. "She'd be five and twenty now."

Susanna blinked. That meant Jasper Redborne had been hanged for stealing horses at age fifteen. No wonder his sister had been outraged.

Struggling, Judith was forced to approach the table. "I've done naught!" she wailed.

"Then place your thumb on the wax and prove it," Susanna said. And prove or disprove my theory, she added silently.

Judith thrust both hands behind her back.

"She is doubtless a Papist," Topcliffe said. "It is her superstitious nature makes her think the devil will rise up and take her the moment she presses her thumb into the wax."

Eyes wide with terror, Judith turned to stare at him. "I am no Papist."

"What are you then, Judith?" Susanna asked in a gentle voice. "It is not your place to seek vengeance. Such things must be left to God." She caught the woman's hand and pressed her thumb into the wax.

Convinced by Dr. Roydon's raving and Topcliffe's taunts that the wax had some occult power to reveal guilt, Judith broke down completely. "He killed my brother!" she sobbed. "I wanted him to suffer."

Sir Edmund acted quickly, calling for Nick to help him convey her to the privacy of the room east of the courtyard. Susanna joined them there a few minutes later, bringing with her the two wax impressions. No one else was allowed in.

"They match perfectly," she said. "This woman killed Barbara Ratsey."

Judith seemed to have lost all desire to deny her guilt. Indeed, she appeared to take pride in what she had done. Her confession left Susanna feeling stunned and sick.

Judith Redborne had planned her revenge for years. She had been in service in a wealthy household in London when she got word of her brother's arrest. She'd stolen a goodly sum of money from her employers and run away, intending to bribe her brother's jailers to set him free. She'd arrived in Northampton too late. In her pain and anger, she'd struck ineffectually at Sir Edmund, but when she'd almost been caught, she'd devised a new plan.

With the stolen money she'd settled in Rockingham and befriended the woman who was then Brudenell's mistress. When he'd tired of Faintnot and taken up with Barbara Ratsey, Judith had found a way to become Barbara's friend too. After knowing Judith for years, both women had been willing to trust her when she recommended remedies for their ailments, but she had waited until she'd taken employment at Deene Park, close to Dame Agnes, before she acted.

"You fool!" she spat, turning a venomous gaze on Sir Edmund. "You did not even realize there had been murder done. I had to kill that poor cow, Maud Hertford, and stuff more poison berries in her mouth after she was dead before you noticed."

"Did you mean Sir Edmund to be blamed?" Susanna asked.

"I wanted him tried and executed, as my brother was, but I wanted him to suffer first. Dame Agnes was never in any danger. Her death would not have troubled him at all."

"Save for the loss of income," Susanna reminded her.

"I did not know about that, not until after she discovered the

gingerbread." Judith's eyes went to the box on the table, where Sir Edmund had left it the previous day.

"What's to be done with her?" Nick asked.

Sir Edmund looked unhappy. "She will be tried at the next Assizes and she will hang, at the least. Burn if she's found guilty of trying to kill me, since I am her master."

Neither man paid any attention to the prisoner as they discussed the ramifications of revealing the sordid details of the case. "It need not all come out," Nick said. "The charge of attempting to poison you is enough to condemn her."

Susanna alone had her eyes on Judith when she heard that she'd face death by fire and realized that she'd be given no further opportunity to cause Brudenell harm. She'd be kept in isolation in a dungeon until her trial and even then she could be prevented from speaking out. Sir Edmund had power in these parts. Judith knew that all too well.

"Not by fire," she muttered under her breath.

Only Susanna heard.

She made no attempt to stop Judith from taking matters into her own hands. By the time she had consumed the last gingerbread wafer, she was in severe pain. She died during the night.

In the parish register the death of Judith Redborne, maidservant to Dame Agnes Brudenell, was writ down as "death by devil's turnips." ♠

CONVERSATION WITH

KATHY LYNN EMERSON

Kathy Lynn Emerson, familiar to AHMM readers for her Lady Appleton stories, is currently a very busy author. Crippen & Landru will soon publish Murders and Other Confusions, a collection of her short stories that includes, in addition to three previously published in our pages, five original tales. In March, she launches a new series with Deadlier than the Pen: A Diana Spaulding Mystery, to be published by Pemberley Press. And

in 2005, her next Lady Appleton novel, Face Down Below the Banqueting House will be published by Perseverance. And she reports that her next Appleton novel is already written! But she did find time to answer a few questions for AHMM.

AHMM: You've published seven novels featuring Lady Appleton, and more are on the way. What sustains your interest in this character over so many works?

KLE: The time frame of the novels and short stories is the secret to keeping Susanna and her friends interesting to write about.

Approximately two years elapse between the events in one book and the start of the next. Friends and relatives die, children are born, fortunes are made and lost, long journeys are undertaken. I've filled in a few of these gaps with short stories, but mostly they just give everyone a little breathing space in which to live a normal life between murders. I also have a large cast of supporting players to draw upon as required. A minor character in one book may become the victim, or the murderer, or the falsely accused innocent three books (six years) later.

AHMM: Your new series also features a female sleuth, a reporter, but it's very different from the Face Down series. Tell us about Diana Spaulding and her world.

KLE: Where Susanna is wealthy and well connected, Diana Spaulding has to struggle to survive on her own in New York in the 1880s. She writes a literary and theatrical review column to support herself. Against her better judgment, she takes an assignment to interview Damon Bathory, the mysterious author of "Tales of Terror," who has been on a lecture tour around the U.S. Her editor wants scandal and "dark secrets" but what Diana discovers is murder. There's a little bit of a gothic flavor to the novel, given the time period and the handsome, enigmatic man at

the center of the story, but Diana is far more independent than the typical governess-as-heroine. One of the assignments she'd like to be given by her editor is the police beat.

The experience of writing is different, too. The language is easier, much closer to 21st century English than the Elizabethans spoke. Both require extensive research. There are plenty of resources for both periods but for the 1880s there are newspapers and magazines, something not yet available in the 16th century.

AHMM: How do you expect the character to develop over the course of the series? What specific goals or plans do you have for her?

KLE: There are tentative plans for four Diana Spaulding mysteries, assuming readers like the series. All will take place in 1888, but Diana will move around. *Deadlier than the Pen* is set in New York City and New England in March, which allowed me to use the Blizzard of '88 as a plot device. In *Fatal as a Fallen Woman* it is April and Diana will travel to Colorado to help her estranged mother, who has been accused of murder. There's a story arc that concerns Diana's personal life and will be completely resolved at the end of the fourth book, but each novel will stand alone as a murder mystery.

AH, RASH DECEIVER!

JOHN H. DIRCKX

Polk Square, normally drab and sedate, was alive this evening with garish lights and raucous laughter. Goblins and monsters flitted up and down the sidewalks. On a bench at the LaFleur Street bus stop a witch discussed politics with a phosphorescent skeleton.

The occasion was the traditional neighborhood Halloween party in the Phoenix District, a rehabilitated slum now tenanted largely by the bizarre and eccentric—liberal thinkers and non-thinkers, professors of a bohemian bent, unemployed poets, laid-off musicians, and starving artists. The annual Halloween festivities included both general merrymaking throughout the district, fostered in various ways by local businesses, and numerous private parties.

The streets that bordered the square were dotted with queer shops catering to the peculiar tastes of odd people. At the corner of Polk and Charleroi stood a coffeehouse called The Scream. Here, as on every other night of the year, folk sipped espresso as thick as roofing tar and offered incense to the goddess Nicotine or her sister Mary Jane while finally solving the Eternal Problems and quite possibly also plotting the Downfall of Civilization.

The Hiding Place, the store next door, sold imported leather goods dyed outlandish colors, which often fell apart the first time they were used or worn. Tonight the proprietor and friends were dispensing hot cider with a pinch of cinnamon, a dollop of molasses, and (to those who knew the password and tendered some extra coin) a belt of gin.

Next to the leather shop, and far back from the sidewalk, stood a private residence, a tall narrow structure in the Queen Anne style that had thus far escaped the indignities of vinyl siding and aluminum awnings. Three jack-o'-lanterns on the porch steps

served as an invitation, not to juvenile beggars—of whom there were literally none in the district—but to all passersby to enter and join in the revels.

Around nine o'clock, a slim dark woman paused uncertainly on the sidewalk, then made her way up the steps past the jack-o'-lanterns and manipulated the knocker. While waiting she shivered slightly, her light sheath dress and filmy scarf providing scant protection against the chilly autumn air.

The door was opened by an older and stouter woman. "Deirdre! You found it! Come on in! Is that a Halloween costume or something from the Salvation Army?"

"Both. I'm traveling light."

"Grab a drink and a nibble. There are some people here you know."

"That I doubt, Mona. That I doubt." Deirdre followed her hostess through the foyer, illuminated by two more jack-o'-lanterns, into a big square room where a dozen people, a few of them in costume, stood around the fireplace, all talking at once. One of these, a pompous, stuffy-looking man in a tweed suit, glanced up as they came into the room.

"Leo, come here. I told you Deirdre was coming, and here she is! Deirdre Gorell, Professor Hollendorp."

The professor blinked from one woman to the other as if someone had suddenly shone a bright light in his eyes. "An enormous pleasure, Miss Gorell," he said, tendering a hand in a manner at once arrogant and obsequious. "How are the sales figures?"

"Putrid so far. Which shows you how much attention the book-buying public pays to the reviewers. That's why we hack writers have to get out and sell our own books. I just spent three hours signing copies downtown at Lash & Teague." She wriggled the fingers of her right hand as if to rid them of cramp.

The professor was still blinking. "I, uh, wanted to thank you for your kind remarks about my small achievement," he murmured vaguely. He was champing at an empty calabash pipe without much enjoyment, and Deirdre supposed that this and the Victorian togs were meant to suggest the persona of Sherlock Holmes.

"I just believe in giving credit where it's due," she assured him. Mona Woolner, at her side, seemed to detect a note of irony in this remark that quite escaped the professor. Anyway, she was grinning wryly as she turned away to mix with the other guests.

"And how's the other project coming along, the Belfoyne letters?" Deirdre asked.

Hollendorp fidgeted. This time even he seemed to sense the del-

icate hint of sarcasm. "That's something else I'd like to talk to you about. But I'm not sure this is the time or the place—"

"Well, it'll probably have to do. Tomorrow I'm in Philly, and the next day Baltimore."

"Well, it's about the Harvard material. I was wondering if you thought we might—"

She watched his discomfiture with a sour smile, evidently enjoying herself hugely.

"Share?" she suggested.

"Collaborate?"

She managed to make them

sound like street words.

"Well, I, that is, it does seem a bit futile for each of us to keep working with only part of the material in hand. Surely pooling our resources makes better sense than working at cross purposes, as it were."

"I don't think so," said Deirdre. She settled her scarf more smoothly over her shoulders and patted the knot as if to make her words more decisive. "The last time I tried to collaborate with anybody, it almost ended in murder."

Professor Hollendorp, obviously unwilling to be put off, was preparing to return to the charge when Deirdre turned away from him somewhat rudely and addressed a woman in a witch outfit who was just passing by.

"Sibyl! Now I know whom Mona meant when she said there were people here I knew."

"Well, look who's exploring the uncharted territory west of the Hudson! This is a pleasant shock. Welcome to the slow lane!"

"Where's Arch?"

"He's around somewhere. Probably sneaked upstairs to look at Mona's books."

"How's the retirement working out?"

"Heavenly. I'm tutoring one day a week at the university, and Arch is working on about three new books at once—and not caring if any of them ever see print."

"It must be nice to have that one perennial moneymaker on the shelves of every bookstore in civilization. I wish I had his knack." She looked around to make sure she wasn't overheard. "Guess who I just met. That pathetic moron Hollendorp. He claims to be flattered that I called his book on O. Henry a

The back hall was long and dark; halfway along it Deirdre overheard a whispered conversation . . .

'yeomanlike piece of work.' Good thing he didn't look it up in the dictionary."

They chatted briefly about shared interests and common friends, then Sibyl Lochlynn excused herself and melted into the crowd.

A lithe waiter in a tuxedo and a Dracula mask stalked among the guests distributing wine, cocktails, and canapés. Deirdre Gorell took a martini and, declining anything more substantial, drifted in the direction of the dining room, where she found Mona Woolner replenishing bowls of nuts and chips.

For a few moments they made small talk with the icy politeness of two women who hold one another in utter abhorrence.

"Is that clock right?" asked Deirdre suddenly.

"Every clock in this house is right. I never could see the point—"

"It's time for me to take a pill." Deirdre put down her empty glass. "I'm parked in the alley behind here. Can I get back there through your kitchen, or do I have to go around?"

"The back hall is quicker. Right through there. You're coming back, aren't you?"

The back hall was long and dark, and halfway along it Deirdre found herself overhearing a whispered conversation from a still darker recess that might have been a stairwell. She couldn't make out exactly what was being said, but the note of anger and urgency in one of the voices was unmistakable. When she heard her own name mentioned, she couldn't help stopping to listen.

Almost at once the unseen speakers fell silent, and then one of them stepped quickly into the hall and nearly ran into Deirdre. "Oh, excuse me! So sorry!"

The speaker could hardly have recognized her in the deep gloom, and Deirdre certainly couldn't see the face behind the mask. But, in surprise, she exclaimed, "Well, that's a voice I didn't expect to hear in this dark, deserted hallway—"

For some years Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn had entertained a growing suspicion that while blind and random chance might play a role in the things that happened to other people the events of his own life were governed by a set of rules unknown to students of probability theory and statistics. And so when for the third night in succession his phone rang within a few minutes of three A.M., he chalked it up to the Auburn Curse.

By a quarter to four he was mounting the porch stairs of the big house in the Phoenix District, where the candles in the jack-o'-lanterns had all burned out.

The woman waiting in the doorway was what cosmeticians call mature and what couturiers call full figured. She walked with her shoulders thrust back like a battalion commander on parade. Her left wrist labored under a burden of heavy bangles (Auburn lost count after eight).

"Good morning, ma'am." He showed identification. "Would you happen to know where the Public Safety officers are who came before the paramedics left?"

"I know exactly where they are." She admitted him to the foyer and closed the front door. "They left here about twenty minutes ago because they were called to the scene of an accident. An all-night pizza delivery car missed the turn at Chase and DeWire and got hung up on the concrete island."

Like most of us, Auburn often found himself comparing people to animals. Right then and there he classified this woman as a shark. He took out a file card and a pen.

"Your name, please?"

"Mona Woolner. Spelled just the way it sounds."

Now he knew who she was. Mona Woolner wrote a syndicated newspaper column on English usage in which she found fault with the grammar, spelling, and punctuation of everybody from the Bard of Avon to the Royal family of Great Britain. On Fridays her column always featured the photograph of a local sign, billboard, or marquee with a misspelled word or a superfluous apostrophe.

"Is this your residence, Ms. Woolner?"

"I live here, yes. And it's Miss Woolner." She held up her left hand, with much jangling of bangles, to demonstrate the absence of a wedding ring. "Not a very noticing person, are we? For a detective?"

It was going to be one of those nights.

"I understand you had a party here last evening?"

"Sort of an open house, for Halloween. It's a tradition in the neighborhood."

"I know. The woman who was killed—was she a friend, someone you invited?"

"I'd call her a colleague rather than a friend," replied Miss Woolner in her hairsplitting way. "She lives—lived—in New York City. She happened to be in town yesterday on business, and I asked her to come by if she got a chance."

"Was she traveling by herself?"

"As far as I know."

"Could you show me—?"

"This way." She took him through a couple of big rooms bearing traces of a recent frolic to a dark narrow passage that led past a

stairway to an outside door. Just inside the door, the body of a woman lay spread-eagled on the uncarpeted floor. She looked about forty-five and seemed pathologically thin. She was wearing a dress of some flimsy, shimmering fabric, which Auburn supposed was meant to be a Halloween outfit of sorts. A scarf of the same material lay on the floor nearby.

Squatting beside the body, Auburn tore his eyes away from the mottled, congested face of the corpse and the still more livid stripe around its neck to examine the knot in the scarf. "I understand she didn't have any purse or ID with her."

"That's right. Just those keys the police officers left on the bottom step. But I can assure you this is Deirdre Gorell."

"Is this just the way she was found?"

"Not exactly. Mario cut the scarf loose as soon as he found her. And the rescue squad moved her on her back."

"Who's Mario?"

"A friend who was helping me entertain. Mario Baldasare. He was taking some empty bottles out to the garbage can and he practically fell over her in the dark."

"Is he still here?"

"No, he went home with a bad case of the shakes. And everybody else left right behind him. A murder in the house sort of wrecks a party—even a Halloween party. Nobody's here but her and me." She eyed the body with a pensive frown. "Is there any chance she could be taken away any time soon?"

Auburn took possession of the ring of keys on the bottom step. "May I use your phone?"

He called headquarters from the kitchen, which was organized like a pharmacy, to confirm that the services of an evidence technician would be needed at the scene. He also called the coroner's night line and learned that the death hadn't been reported yet. Mona Woolner hovered within earshot during the two calls, making coffee.

"Your call to the dispatcher was logged at two twenty-seven," Auburn told her. "How long before that was she found?"

"Probably less than five minutes."

"Was that back door locked?"

"And bolted. Still is."

"Would some of your guests have been partying there in the back hall?"

"I doubt it. Unless they wanted to slip off somewhere for a private conversation. It's dark there, and chilly, and the hall doesn't lead anywhere except to the back stairs and the back door."

"Do you have any idea what Miss Gorell might have been doing

back there?" He assumed Miss was the right word, since the dead woman was wearing no rings.

"She said she was going out to her van in the alley to take a pill."

"Could anyone have come down the back stairway into the hall?"

"I guess so, but nobody should have been upstairs in the first place. The police searched the whole house as soon as they got here. Would you like some fresh coffee?"

Auburn accepted a cup with sincere expressions of gratitude, and took the liberty of sitting at the kitchen table before his knees buckled under him with fatigue.

"Do you know anything about her family, or how they could be reached?"

"I'm sorry, I don't."

"Do you have any idea why someone would have wanted to kill her? Were there other people here besides you who knew her?"

"One or two. I wouldn't have thought any of them were murderously inclined, though."

"You used the expression 'open house.' Were there any people at the party that you didn't know?"

"One or two."

"What kind of business was she in?"

"Deirdre? Professional writer. Literary criticism, social commentary, satire. She was in town to sign copies of her latest book, *To Coin a Cliché*, downtown at Lash & Teague."

Birds of a feather, thought Auburn. "What did you say was your personal relation to her?" he asked.

"I didn't. We edited two books together a number of years ago, when I was still teaching in the East. And we used to meet from time to time at conventions. I may as well tell you, before somebody else does, that we hated each other. But I didn't strangle her in my own back hall."

"Mind you," she continued, "I don't say I couldn't commit murder, given adequate provocation." The events of the night, the lateness of the hour, and possibly the coffee seemed to have put her into a slightly overwrought mood. "People who say lay when they mean lie and use hopefully as a sentence adverb throw me into a homicidal fury. And I long to throttle people who say *Weeyum* instead of William, and *haveen* instead of having. I could cheerfully—"

"But I don't suppose Miss Gorell made mistakes like that, did she?" he suggested in an effort to turn her off. "Is it possible she'd been at another party in the district before she came here?"

"Remotely. But she was a stranger in town, and only knew a couple of people here besides me."

"Could I ask you to make me a list of the people who were here in your house during the evening?"

"I can do it right now, if you like. I'm not going to sleep for a while, that's certain. I sent invitations to twenty-three people. Some of them didn't come, and some of those who did left before Deirdre got here. And at least twenty other people drifted in without invitations, and a few of those I didn't know from Adam. If you'll excuse me, I'll start on that list."

Auburn had another file card out, ready to make a list of his own. "Before you do that, maybe you'd just let me know which of your guests knew Miss Gorell. And anybody else you saw her talking to."

"That's easy. I introduced her to Professor Hollendorp, and I know she talked to Sibyl Lochlynn, and probably her husband Arch. They're all on my list of invited guests."

"Was she staying at a hotel downtown?"

"Oh, no. When Deirdre was on the road, she lived out of her van."

"I think you said it was parked in the alley behind you?"

"Yes. At least that's what she told me."

Auburn picked up the keys. "I'll go out the front door and around," he said. "I don't want to touch that back door. By the way, there'll be an investigator here from the coroner's office in a few minutes, and a police evidence technician. You might let them know where I am."

He went along the sidewalk past The Hiding Place and The Scream, both now dark and deserted, and down a side street to the alley. Very little light penetrated to the alley from the street, and Auburn had to use his flashlight in order to find Deirdre Gorell's van without breaking his ankle in a pothole.

The van was sleek and streamlined under its coat of road dust. Auburn wrote down the registration number, then unlocked the door on the driver's side and examined the interior by the ceiling light before slipping in behind the steering wheel. He found himself in a subminiature RV, a miracle of condensation that featured a bathroom, a refrigerator and gas stove, and a closet stuffed with funky clothes along the lines of the outfit Miss Gorell was wearing when she died. The dashboard on the passenger's side had been converted to a desk equipped with a cell phone and a laptop computer. The passenger's seat could be lowered to form the front half of a narrow bunk along the right side of the vehicle.

Auburn sneezed three times before he saw the litterbox and the food and water bowls marked SATAN. While he was wondering what had become of the cat, he discovered that the screen over the rear window above the bunk had been forced in, and mental-

ly kicked himself for not having made a more thorough search of the exterior of the van before climbing inside.

Opening cabinets and shifting things around with his pen so as not to add his own fingerprints to any others that might be present, he made a thorough search. He found meat, cheese, fruit, and three brands of beer in the refrigerator, and seven kinds of pills in the bathroom cupboard. A cardboard carton contained several plastic-wrapped copies of the new book Mona Woolner had mentioned.

From under the rear part of the bunk, Auburn retrieved a purse containing a driver's license, credit cards, and a bundle of cash that was approximately equal to his take-home pay for the past three months. There were also two heavy canvas shopping bags stuffed with papers—correspondence, typed manuscripts, receipts, photocopies of passages from books.

He locked the van again, leaving the damaged screen just as he had found it, and went back to the house, this time fumbling his way through a narrow passage leading from the alley to the weed-choked back yard. A bulky silhouette moving deliberately across the blind of the back door told him that Nick Stamaty from the coroner's office had already arrived. This was welcome news, since Auburn was walking around with the dead woman's purse tucked under his arm and was eager to turn it over as soon as possible to the public official in whose custody it properly belonged.

Auburn let himself into the house by the front door and found Stamaty taking flash pictures of the death scene from various angles. "Anything there on next of kin?" asked Stamaty, when he caught sight of the purse.

"I don't think so. Pretty good bundle of cash for you to stow away in the safe downtown, though. There are lots of papers out in her van, but I want Kestrel to go over it before I take anything else out."

"Something funny about the van?"

"Somebody shoved in a screen at the back. But I can't tell if anything's missing besides the cat."

Stamaty gave him a look.

"By the way, she was on lots of pills. Looks like serious stuff. You might want to nab them before they take the van in to the garage." He nodded toward the corpse. "You saw the fingernails?"

"Three on each hand ripped down to the quick. She probably did that trying to pull the scarf loose, but she might have left some marks on whoever was twisting the scarf. And he could have left some of his skin behind."

A light came on at the head of the back stairs and to the rhythmic clanking of bangles Miss Woolner descended with a list of

people who had been at the party. She'd run a copy for each of them. Stamaty took his graciously enough, even though it was no part of his job to figure out which name on the list, if any, belonged to the murderer.

Auburn and Stamaty were in the kitchen counting the money from Deirdre Gorell's purse when the knocker sounded and Miss Woolner admitted Sergeant Kestrel, the evidence technician. Heavily laden with camera case and field kit, Kestrel followed Miss Woolner to the back hall. As he passed the kitchen he gave Auburn and Stamaty only an austere nod, as if he thought he'd caught them gambling.

They finished counting the money a second time, wrote the amount, source, and date on a heavy envelope, sealed the money in it, and co-signed across the flap.

"You going back to talk to him?" asked Auburn

Stamaty served himself another cup of coffee. "I'm not in any hurry," he said. "I'll let him get his shots before I bag her hands."

Kestrel tackled every job with the intensity and absorption of a finalist in an international chess competition, and working with him in the middle of the night could be particularly trying. Auburn eventually went to the back hall to tell him about the van and give him the keys. Then he headed downtown.

A sharp, penetrating wind had sprung up during the last hour. When he arrived at headquarters, the birds were already chattering in the trees outside the courthouse across the street. He shaved and showered in the locker room. Catnapping in his office was out of the question—Miss Woolner's coffee had taken care of that. He booted up his PC, opened a file on the Deirdre Gorell murder, and entered preliminary data. He even started key-stroking in the list of people who had been at the party, but as soon as the canteen opened at six he went down for breakfast. Then he went back to his office and finished entering the list.

Glue-eyed and bone weary, he intercepted his immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage, before morning report.

"I gather accident and suicide are pretty well ruled out," commented Savage with a hint of irony, when Auburn had outlined the case.

"It looks to me," agreed Auburn, "like a pretty straightforward case of voluntary womanslaughter. And I don't think there's any doubt that somebody, probably whoever killed her, broke into her van."

Not being a snitch by nature, Auburn didn't mention to Savage that Patrolmen Bystrom and Meyers had filed only a sketchy investigational report after notifying the third watch commander of the homicide and had left the scene unsecured when they dashed off

together to write up a one-car fender-bender not involving personal injury. He also didn't mention that neither the Public Safety officers nor the paramedics who had pronounced Deirdre Gorell dead at the scene had bothered to alert the coroner's office.

When the regular day crew came on duty in Records, Auburn e-mailed them a copy of Mona Woolner's list with the request that, for starters, they do background checks on the people Miss Woolner had seen talking to Deirdre Gorell, and also on Mario Baldasare, who had found her dead and cut the scarf from her neck.

Around nine o'clock, more or less awake, he set off to interview Baldasare at Jervis Academy, an exclusive prep school in the south suburb of Broadlands. The receptionist in the school office examined his ID carefully, consulted a computer screen, and asked if his business was urgent.

"Not exactly. Is he tied up all morning?"

"Just until ten. If you wouldn't mind waiting till his lesson is over—"

She directed him to an upstairs arcade, where potted palms stood before a long row of windows and the terrazzo floor glistened like a hockey rink in the morning sun. He sat down to wait in a wicker chair opposite Baldasare's studio. From behind the door came the thready voice of a young girl singing, over and over, a ballad that began, "Ah, rash deceiver!" Every time she finished the piece the vague rumble of the teacher's voice was briefly audible and then, after a flourish of piano notes, she started again.

At length a shrill bell sounded throughout the building, and almost immediately the door opened and a girl of about fourteen emerged. It was hard to tell which one was more relieved that the lesson was over, the pupil or the teacher who hovered in the doorway.

Auburn waited until the girl was out of earshot before showing identification. "Professor Baldasare?"

"Mario. Come in."

Baldasare was about forty and looked like the male lead in an Italian movie, or maybe somebody in a pasta commercial. He also looked a lot more exhausted than would be expected after giving a music lesson. But that wasn't surprising, since Mona Woolner had said he'd left her place in the middle of the night with a bad case of the shakes. He ushered Auburn into a studio with a high ceiling, a grand piano, and a glass-fronted cabinet in which hung several violins.

"I'll try not to take more than a few minutes of your time," said Auburn. "I just need a statement from you about what happened last night."

Baldasare sat back in a plush armchair and closed his eyes in a manner that Auburn found faintly theatrical. "I told the police everything I know last night," he said.

"I know. But those officers were called away before they had a chance to tie up all the loose ends, and you had left by the time I got there. I understand you were working as a waiter at Miss Woolner's party."

"Waiter, bartender, dishwasher, kitchen maid . . ."

"What's your relation to Miss Woolner, if I may ask?"

Baldasare opened his eyes abruptly. "I'm not sure what you're getting at," he said.

"The truth, I hope. All I meant was, were you getting paid?"

"She gave me fifty dollars. It'll cost me at least half of that to get the anchovy paste and wine stains out of my tuxedo. And besides that, I nearly broke my neck falling over the body."

"Tell me about that."

"I was taking a plastic trash bag full of empty bottles out to the garbage can in the alley. The back hall was dark, and I didn't see the body on the floor till I tripped over it."

"What did you do then?"

Baldasare's eyes were closed again. He pantomimed his actions as he described them, like someone acting out a dream. "I put down the bag and stooped down to see what was wrong. I thought at first that she was just drunk or passed out. Then I saw the scarf knotted around her neck like a noose. I called for help, and cut the scarf loose. Three or four people came—"

"What did you cut it with?"

"This." He pulled a ring of keys out of his pocket and showed Auburn a miniature pocket knife attached to it. "Not much of a tool, but it comes in handy sometimes. Anyway, it went through that scarf without too much sawing."

"Was that how you cut your hand?"

"No, that was earlier." Baldasare squirmed. "I was supposed to be wearing a horror mask because it was a Halloween party. But with the mask on, I couldn't see anything except what was straight in front of me. I kept bumping into people, and anybody who wanted a drink had to wave or yell to get my attention. So I went into the kitchen and tried to enlarge the eye-holes in the mask—with this same knife—but the mask cracked all to pieces. I stuffed it in the trash, and, well, that's the main reason why I was making a quick run to the garbage can."

"Were you acquainted with the woman who was strangled?"

"No, not at all."

"Had you seen her earlier at the party?"

"Probably. But I was too busy quenching thirsts and wiping up spills to pay much attention to the people who were doing the drinking and the spilling. Those folks who hang out in the Phoenix District aren't exactly my crowd."

After recording a few details on a file card, Auburn thanked Baldasare for his time and trouble and headed straight for the Phoenix District.

Professor Leo Hollendorp lived on LaFleur Street in a hulking gray stucco house that stood almost back to back with Mona Woolner's place. French windows at one side of the deep porch gave Auburn a view of the professor's study, where the autumn sunshine floodlit two walls crammed from floor to ceiling with books. Of the professor there was no trace, and Auburn's ringing and knocking failed to rouse anyone.

After trying the kitchen door with the same result, he went along the back walk to the alley. The murdered woman's van had been moved to the police garage for further examination after Kestrel had finished going over it during the night. Auburn slipped furtively into Mona Woolner's back yard. Lifting the lids of two large galvanized steel garbage cans, he found them both nearly empty.

Mr. and Mrs. Archer Lochlynn didn't live in the Phoenix District. Their opulent three-story mansion stood in a development so new it didn't appear on the latest city map. Auburn's ring at the door was answered by an ash blonde with deeply dimpled cheeks, a nose like a skewer, and a languorous manner that didn't fit the hard glitter in her eyes.

"Mrs. Lochlynn?"

"I'm Sibyl."

He saw at once that she was one of those people who act as if they disapproved intensely of your manner, your wardrobe, and the shape of your head, but were just too terribly well-bred to say so. He showed her identification.

"Oh, more police? Come in."

She admitted him to a flag-stone foyer and motioned for him to precede her down a short flight of stairs to a large open area flooded with daylight that had probably figured in the architect's blueprint as the Great Room. A man in a rumpled smock looked up in mild annoyance from a table where he was working at a painting on a large sheet of glass or transparent plastic. A potent and pervasive chemical smell emanated from the shallow pans of paint that littered the table.

"Detective," she announced briefly. "Sit down, Inspector." Auburn didn't bother to tell her that the only inspectors in this jurisdiction worked for the Board of Health.

"Getting anywhere?" asked the man, seemingly too engrossed in his work to give Auburn a second look. He was short and slightly plump, with a round, youthful face that belied the silvery hair.

"Not yet, I'm afraid. Sorry to bother you while you're working—"

"He's not working," said Sibyl. She had taken a seat in the corner and picked up a stack of papers, evidently resuming a task that Auburn's ring had interrupted. "It's a labor of love. Privilege of the retired. Isn't it, sweetie?" She scrunched up her face into something between a kiss and a grimace of pain, and then looked expectantly at Auburn.

"I'd just like to ask a few routine questions to fill out the record, since you were both at the party last night when Miss Gorell was found strangled."

"Sure. That's understood." Lochlynn wiped his rubber-gloved hands on a rag, but seemed unable to tear his eyes away from the intricate and richly colored landscape he'd been working on.

"According to my information, you were acquainted with Miss Gorell."

Sibyl nodded. "At one time, all three of us were teaching together at the Lyons Institute in the East. That was before we were married. Wasn't it, love?"

"Mm-hmm." He stood up and stepped back a few paces from the table, still entranced by his work.

"But we hadn't seen her for a couple of years," she continued. "And Mona's party was the last place in the world we expected her to turn up."

"You hadn't been in touch with her recently, then?"

"No. Arch took an early retirement last year. The constant writing and lecturing were grinding him down, so we pulled up stakes and decided to settle down and relax in this little backwater—if I may call your fair city that, without giving offense. I tutor kids with reading handicaps at the university one day a week, Arch has plenty of time to paint, and we've both been enjoying a second honeymoon."

Lochlynn was pacing in a patch of shadow near the empty fireplace. Auburn tried to catch his eye. "Where did you teach art in the East, sir?"

"He didn't teach art. I told you, painting is his avocation. Arch's field is history. He's the author of the standard work on the colonization of Latin America. A perennial bestseller, in fact. Only he'd never tell you that because he's got some kind of complex about it."

Lochlynn drew himself up to his full height. Without removing his gloves, he crammed his hands into the pockets of the smock so that it stretched smooth across his middle. "It isn't a complex," he said. "I just don't happen to think of it as such a great accomplishment. My mother was Bolivian—a lineal descendant of one of the original conquistadors." He shrugged. "Well, I wrote a book about it. And it sold."

"Just like that," said Sibyl, mimicking his shrug. "No research, no summer trips to Mexico or Peru, no nights spent grinding out the manuscript on an old electric typewriter with a broken capital N—"

"Okay, so it was a lot of work. But there'll never be a fourth edition. I've already told—"

"Arch, the inspector isn't interested in your book."

"Well, who brought it up?"

Lochlynn seemed annoyed, but Auburn couldn't tell if they were genuinely bickering, playing a lovers' game, or putting on some kind of show for his benefit.

"Getting back to the party," Auburn said, thinking, *Not that we've been anywhere near it yet.* "Could you just tell me what happened, as you observed it?" He looked from one to the other, but he knew perfectly well who would answer first.

"We got to Mona's about eight," Sibyl said. "After we'd been there for an hour or so, just as I was thinking it was time to move along, I looked up and there was Deirdre. She said she was in town to sign copies of her latest book at Lash & Teague. I talked to her for a few minutes, and so did Arch."

"Then we moved away to another group and decided to have one more drink, and the next thing we knew, people were yelling in the back hall. Somebody said a woman had been killed right there in the house during the party. We went back to see what was going on, but Mona wouldn't let anybody into the back hall. Then the rescue squad came, and the police, and it was probably another twenty minutes before we knew it was Deirdre who'd been killed."

"Did you see her talking to anyone else, or did she happen to say anything that might possibly explain why she was murdered?"

"I didn't notice her talking to anybody else except Mona. Arch actually stayed with her longer than I did." She looked across at him expectantly.

"I didn't see her talking to anybody either," said Lochlynn, "but she mentioned that Mona had introduced her to Professor Hollendorp, and that she'd had a minor disagreement with him about some letters. She said he wanted to get his hands on them—his grubby mitts, as she put it—but that, as long as he

was playing the dog in the manger with the letters he already had, she wasn't about to cast her pearls before swine."

"Now that you mention it," said Sibyl, "she did talk about that."

"What can you tell me about Professor Hollendorp?" Auburn asked.

"He teaches American literature," she said. "A doddering old nincompoop, by my observation. The rumor around the university is that he's been giving the same lectures, word for word, for the past twenty-five years, including the same stupid jokes. The chair of the English Department told me that if somebody stuck a page out of a shoe catalog in Leo Hollendorp's notes, he'd probably read it to his class without even knowing the difference. Have you talked to him?"

"Not yet. He wasn't home when I tried his place this morning. He certainly seems to have accumulated an impressive library."

"Books don't make a scholar. Do they, Arch?" She twisted briefly to give Lochlynn a coy grin and then turned back to Auburn. "Do you know why he has so many books? They're all review copies he got free from textbook publishers over the years. I guarantee he's never opened one of them."

"Would you know anything more about this argument he was supposed to have had with Miss Gorell?"

"I wouldn't call it an argument exactly," said Lochlynn. "It seems about seven or eight years ago somebody commissioned him to edit the correspondence of some minor author—"

"Randall Belfoyne," said Sibyl. "An Early American nobody. Hollendorp has been puttering around with those letters for years. He won't let anybody see them, and he hasn't come up with even a first draft of his critical apparatus. The general belief is that he's either lost the letters, or is permanently stalemated by the fact that some of them are written in French and others in Italian, and he knows about as much of either language as I do of Japanese."

Auburn looked at the clock over the fireplace. "And how did Miss Gorell come into that picture?"

Sibyl Lochlynn laughed, a malicious snicker like the sound of tin-foil tearing. "Some more letters of Belfoyne's turned up at Harvard last spring," she said, "and Deirdre's publisher got hold of them and turned them over to her for editing. Professor Hollendorp wanted to see them, and Deirdre told him nothing doing."

Lochlynn was pacing again. "I hope you aren't taking any of this too seriously, Officer," he said. "Spats like that are a dime a dozen in the academic world. They don't ordinarily lead to murder. And Leo Hollendorp wouldn't have enough sense to slap a mosquito, let alone strangle anybody."

He was clearly impatient to get back to his labor of love, and in the intervals when Sibyl wasn't talking her head off she had her nose deep in her papers. Auburn verified the spelling of their names, recorded their phone number, and left them to their chosen pursuits.

At a public phone booth he looked up Hollendorp's number, called it, and got an answering machine. The professor's droning voice recited his office hours and invited the caller to leave a message. Instead of doing so, Auburn headed for the university and a building with the improbable name of Coward's Annex.

His timing was perfect. Just as he arrived at the professor's office from one end of the corridor, the professor arrived from the other and fumbled with a ring of keys. He was wearing a black and tan checked cloth cap and a jacket that might have been made from a worn-out throw rug. A thin gray beard fringed a face as flat and uninspired as a dinner plate.

"Come in," he said. "I know what this is all about."

"Just routine, sir."

Hollendorp turned on the fluorescent ceiling lights, doffed his cap, and disburdened himself of a heavy satchel that looked like a relic of the Civil War. The office was small, cramped, and dusty. Auburn wondered whether the litter of books here represented the overflow from the professor's study at home, or vice versa. Before sitting down behind his desk, Hollendorp moved a canvas bookbag from the only other chair to make a place for Auburn to sit down.

Auburn sneezed.

"Just routine," he said again. "I'm interviewing people who were at Miss Woolner's party last night, and you're on my list. Were you still there when the murder was discovered?"

"Barely. I went to the party as Sherlock Holmes. The tweeds I was wearing were a bit on the warm side, what with a fire in the fireplace and about thirty people in one room. As I was on the point of heading for home, the commotion started, and I waited just long enough to learn what it was about. I heard the sirens as I was leaving the house."

Auburn felt sorry for the generation or so of students who had had to sit through lectures delivered in that lifeless monotone, of which he had already heard a sample on the telephone. The professor had a habit of staring straight before him and blinking like someone who has lost his glasses. Auburn tried unsuccessfully to imagine him as Sherlock Holmes.

"I believe you live just across the alley from Miss Woolner. Did you leave by the front door?"

The blinking stopped momentarily.

"Why, yes, since the back part of the house was a viper's tangle of shouting men and hysterical women. But I did walk around to the back and cross the alley to my place, instead of going up to the end of the block."

"Did you notice Miss Gorell's van parked in the alley?"

"I can't say that I did. That alley is full of illegally parked cars at all hours of the day and night, and what with all the parties going on in the district last night . . ." He stopped and shrugged. "And I wouldn't know her van if I fell over it."

"But you did know her?"

"I met her for the first time last night, but I've known her by reputation for years. A thoroughly venomous creature, though I'm speaking ill of the dead."

"I believe you had some sort of argument with her last night?"

"Not exactly an argument—more of a face-off."

"Could you tell me a little more about that?"

"You seem to be pretty well informed already."

"Just a suggestion someone made. I'd like to get your version of it."

Hollendorp stood up, thrust his hands behind him, and cracked several knuckles, making an alarming noise like the distant rattle of rifle fire. "Deirdre Gorell," he said, speaking with deliberation, "was a colossal fraud—an academic con artist. She was thrown off the faculties of a half-dozen universities because she lacked both erudition and intellectual integrity. That's why she had to make a living by regurgitating the work of serious scholars in watered-down versions for the pop culture market. What's that quote from Wilson Mizner? 'If you steal from one author, it's plagiarism; if you steal from many, it's research.'"

Even when the professor was trying to be bombastic, his voice had a soporific effect—particularly on someone who had been up most of the previous night.

"And your argument with Miss Gorell . . . ?" Auburn suggested.

"It wasn't an argument," he repeated petulantly. "I asked her in a civil fashion to let me see some materials she had in her possession, to help with an editorial project I have in hand. She refused point-blank, as rudely as she knew how."

"A purely academic difference, then?"

"Well, I didn't kill her, if that's what you're driving at, and I don't have the faintest idea who did. But I know who you've been talking to—the Lochlynnns."

"Were they in on your conversation with Miss Gorell?"

"No, but I saw them lurking in the background," answered

Hollendorp with a sneer of distaste. "They're what I might refer to as a biracial couple."

Auburn's eyebrows went up but he said nothing.

"He's human," explained the professor, "and she isn't."

Auburn sneezed again. He eyed the heavy knit bookbag that lay on the desk a yard away, its floral needlepoint decoration curiously out of keeping with the professor's stodgy masculinity.

"These materials you wanted from Miss Gorell," he said. "Did she have them with her?"

"At a Halloween party? Of course not."

"I mean did she have them along with her on this trip? In her van, for instance?"

Hollendorp sat down again and manifested an intense absorption in a loose thread on his sleeve. "That I wouldn't know. Is it important?"

"It's important if it was the motive for murder. What would you say if I asked you to show me what's in that bag on your desk?"

"I'd ask you to show me a search warrant," retorted the professor in the imperious tone he probably used with students who threatened to deflate his ego in front of a class.

"Believe me," Auburn assured him, "that can be arranged. Right now, though, I'm just going to place you under arrest on suspicion of withholding evidence. We'll go downtown, take a set of your fingerprints, and compare them with the ones you left all over the van. Meanwhile, you have the right to remain silent and say nothing. If you do make a statement . . ."

It was the purest bluff, but it worked like a stick of dynamite in a logjam. Hollendorp twisted the bag around and slid its contents out on the desk—two thick manila file folders held together with purple rubber bands.

"All right, you've caught me with the goods," he growled. "That's my own fault for not having enough sense to hide this stuff when I sneaked in here with it last night. But don't think you're going to prove that I killed that silly nitwit. As I told you, I left the party immediately after learning that she was dead. Then I saw her van there in the dark alley with the back window half open. In a moment of weakness, I looked inside to see if she had the Belfoyne letters with her. Well, here they are."

"You borrowed them?"

"Precisely the word. Not that they were hers in the first place. Documents like these don't belong exclusively to anyone. Besides, she was dead. I would have returned them to her publishers in due course. I just wanted to make photocopies of them

and see what sort of editorial work she had done on them so far, if any."

"What was that quote again? 'If you steal from one author . . . ?' "

"All right, touché," snorted Hollendorp. "What's next?"

"We go downtown and you make a statement. The blue bag and its contents go with us as evidence."

"Will I be charged with theft?"

"No, burglary. For starters."

Auburn sneezed repeatedly on the trip to headquarters. He took Hollendorp to an interrogation room, ordered two lunch trays from the canteen, and summoned a police stenographer. With a minimum of prompting, he elicited an official statement from the professor about his borrowing of the letters from the van. While it was being typed he turned over the stolen goods to the evidence custodian and obtained a receipt.

Auburn was fairly certain Hollendorp hadn't murdered Deirdre Gorell. The man might be an arrogant, spineless buffoon—perhaps even the doddering old nincompoop Sibyl Lochlynn had called him—but he wasn't the killing type. And even the comparatively minor charge of stealing a bunch of old letters out of an unoccupied vehicle would subject him to public ridicule, professional disgrace, and possibly a harsh legal penalty. He sent the professor back to the campus in a cruiser.

During the night, Deirdre Gorell's van had been driven to the police garage. Auburn walked through the tunnel that led from headquarters to the garage and, after complying with the stringent regulations governing such matters, gained access to it once again. This time he took a pocketful of facial tissues with him.

The van had been thoroughly searched at the scene by Kestrel, who had once missed a stash of cocaine in a car and had no intention of ever letting it happen again. Kestrel had found no cocaine and had left Deirdre Gorell's possessions in far better order than he had found them. Auburn took the two heavy canvas bags of papers and a copy of Miss Gorell's book and trudged back to his office with them.

Background checks were waiting for him on Deirdre Gorell, Mona Woolner, Mario Baldasare, Professor Hollendorp, and the Lochlynns. The dead woman's history was pretty much as it had been outlined for him by Woolner and Hollendorp. Woolner was a professor emerita of English at the university. Baldasare's name had been legally changed from Smaniotti when he was fourteen, because of an adoption. Hollendorp was a widower, and the author of four books on American authors. The Lochlynns had arrived from New York City twenty months ago. Archer Lochlynn's book

on the colonization of Latin America retailed at \$49.50, and the publisher could barely keep up with the demand. As nearly as could be determined, all of these people were squeaky clean, the sort whose transgressions are limited to tailgating on the Interstate and failing to report instant lottery winnings on their income tax.

Under county law, as long as the coroner had custody of Deirdre Gorell's remains, he also had control of her personal property. Auburn called Stamaty at his office in the courthouse across the street to report the recovery of the letters of Randall Belfoyne. In return, Stamaty gave him a preliminary coroner's report.

The paramedics had found Deirdre Gorell's pupils dilated and nonreactive, and her tracing on the heart monitor had been a flat line before, during, and after basic resuscitation maneuvers. The autopsy confirmed that death was due to strangulation, but also showed that she had a form of lymphatic cancer, which would probably have killed her within a year. The forensic pathologist was awaiting information from the specialist in New York City who had prescribed her medicines. Examination of her torn fingernails had yielded no clear-cut evidence of foreign skin cells, but material was being preserved for DNA testing if needed.

Auburn tackled Deirdre Gorell's papers. One bag contained notes and manuscripts, the other correspondence. To judge from the materials in the first bag, the late Miss Gorell had devoted at least half her time and energy to undermining the reputations of rival authors, impugning their scholarship and intellectual integrity in book reviews, essays in literary magazines, radio and television interviews, and public lectures.

In the second bag, Auburn found, besides Deirdre Gorell's correspondence, a bundle of letters from an agent in Manhattan addressed to Rod Lee Ridgler, who it appeared was some kind of songwriter or poet. Unlike the Belfoyne letters that Professor Hollendorp had purloined, these were current, the most recent dated only three weeks earlier. Since this correspondence had turned up in Deirdre Gorell's van, and had been addressed to the same post office box as her own mail, she and Ridgler had evidently been on fairly close terms.

As the afternoon wore on, the cumulative effects of three nights in succession out of bed started catching up with Auburn. He packed up the Gorell materials and signed out early. He had become adept at using the increasingly sophisticated resources afforded by the Internet to law enforcement agencies for gathering arcane information. And by means of a link to the Public

Safety Department's server, he was able to access these resources from his home computer. After a couple of hours on-line he went to bed and read himself to sleep with Deirdre Gorell's book.

When the alarm went off the next morning, he felt that his first full night's sleep in half a week had taken five years off his age. But he was mildly annoyed to discover that the opening line of that idiotic song, "Ah, rash deceiver!" kept echoing obtrusively in his head.

When he got to the office he found his IN tray full of routine work, none of it pertaining to the Gorell murder. It was midmorning before he could get back to his computer chase, but by lunchtime he had made half a dozen long-distance phone calls and sought out Lieutenant Savage to discuss applying for an arrest warrant.

After hearing him out, Savage sat back in his chair and looked up from the sheaf of papers Auburn had handed him. "I'm not sure this all comes under the heading of police work, Cy," he said. "To me it looks more like literary research."

"We'll find out what kind of research it is when the jury comes back."

When Auburn arrived at Mona Woolner's place after lunch, he was accompanied by Patrolman Fritz Dollinger. Miss Woolner manifested neither pleasure nor annoyance when she discovered them on her porch. As she led them through the foyer and into the tall, ornate parlor, Auburn noted that she was still wearing the full complement of bangles on her wrists.

"I think you met these people yesterday," she said, waving toward Arch and Sibyl Lochlynn, who sat lounging by the fire with teacups in their hands.

Auburn nodded and introduced Dollinger. They both declined to sample the tea, but no power on earth could have kept Dollinger away from the cake.

"I see by the morning paper," observed Sibyl Lochlynn, "that, after giving Leo Hollendorp the third degree yesterday, you had to let him go. How's that going to look on your résumé—arresting the wrong man?"

Auburn ignored her. "I wanted to let you know," he told Mona Woolner, "that you left a couple of names off your list of people who were here the night before last."

She bridled as if he'd accused her of splitting an infinitive. "I gave you the names of everyone I invited, and anybody else I recognized," she said loftily. "I told you there were people here I didn't know."

"I think you knew both of these people quite well," said Auburn.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense, Inspector," said Sibyl. "Who are they?"

"One of them was Rod Lee Ridgler."

They all looked blank.

"A writer of lyrics for some of the top rappers and country-western recording artists," explained Auburn. "Also known as Deirdre Gorell."

Now they were all agog.

"I'd call that a first-class coup of literary detection," gushed Miss Woolner. "If it's true. It almost makes up for your thinking Leo Hollendorp had the intestinal fortitude to strangle a woman."

"It's an anagram, isn't it?" blurted Sibyl. "Rod Lee Ridgler—Deirdre Gorell!"

"Pseudonyms seem to be pretty common in literary circles," continued Auburn. "Professor Hollendorp wrote a book about O. Henry, who, as I recall, changed his name from Porter because he didn't want the reading public, or his daughter, to find out he was an ex-con."

"It didn't work," said Mona Woolner. "It all came out anyway."

"Yes," said Auburn, "it's a full-time job maintaining a pseudonym—or, as we call it in our business, an alias. And one of your guests whose real name doesn't appear on your list gave himself away by displaying some guilty ignorance."

"I think you'll find, Inspector," said Sibyl, "that the usual expression is 'culpable ignorance.'"

"Or maybe 'reprehensible,'" suggested Mona Woolner.

"Thanks all the same, but believe it or not, I know what I'm talking about. One form of evidence used by prosecutors in court is what's called *guilty knowledge*—information possessed by the defendant that only the criminal would be expected to have. For instance, exactly what weapon was used, or what the victim was wearing, or where the body was found—you know the sort of thing.

"As far as I know, the murderer of Deirdre Gorell didn't reveal any guilty knowledge. But he did display what I'm calling guilty ignorance."

Lochlynn stood up and put his back against the mantelpiece. "Would you care to explain that?" he asked.

"Sure. I may not be much of a scholar, but my Spanish teacher in high school hammered it into me that all nouns ending in *r* form their plurals by adding *es*. So when you said *conquistadors*, instead of *conquistadores*, with five syllables—"

Lochlynn favored him with a patronizing smirk. "Officer, it's an English word by now. And, as you may recall, I was speaking English at the time."

"All the same, you planted a seed of doubt in my mind. That

seed sprouted when I read Deirdre Gorell's last book. You told me she referred to Professor Hollendorp's *grubby mitts* and his *dog in the manger* attitude, and said she wasn't about to *cast pearls before swine*. But her whole book is a scathing indictment of people who think and talk in clichés, like *scathing indictment*. There's no way she really said what you claimed she did."

"Okay, so I juiced up the dialog a little when I reported our conversation. Is that illegal?"

"You wouldn't have needed to make up the conversation if you'd really talked to her, instead of just being coached by someone who had." Auburn looked pointedly at Sibyl.

Lochlynn was the picture of mystification. "But I did talk to her. She was here at the party, I was here . . ."

"Exactly, and that's why she had to die. Because she knew you weren't really Arch Lochlynn."

"Now, that's utter nonsense," objected Mona Woolner. "Dozens of people, including me, can swear that he's Arch Lochlynn."

"That doesn't change the facts," said Auburn. "When I looked into the background of Archer Lochlynn, I learned that he was sixty-seven years old. Even with the frosting job on your hair, sir, you're obviously fifteen or twenty years younger than that. And, by the way, your roots are showing dark. You both have the right to remain silent . . ." He finished the statutory warning, this time in earnest.

The man standing on the hearth was again registering puzzlement. "Remain silent about what?" he asked. "What are we accused of, exactly?"

Auburn took two arrest warrants from his pocket. "I'm charging you both with the murder of Deirdre Gorell," he said. "Whether you'll be charged with the murder of Arch Lochlynn as well depends on how much evidence the Manhattan police can come up with."

"I still don't understand this at all," said Miss Woolner. "If he isn't Arch, who is he?"

"This morning, while I was trying to get in touch with somebody who knew Arch Lochlynn, I came across the name of the man who designed the dust jacket for his book—a chemical engineer turned artist, who developed a technique for painting on glass with translucent pigments suspended in acid. Apparently he was better at chemistry than at painting—anyway, he wasn't very successful. And he seems to have vanished without a trace, right about the same time that Arch Lochlynn retired from his teaching post and moved here with his wife.

"I had the New York State Bureau of Motor Vehicles fax me a

picture of Arch Lochlynn, from his most recent driver's license, and also one of the missing artist. That's how I know the other person whose name was missing from your list is Todd Junghans."

At the sound of his name, Junghans stopped acting and collapsed heavily into his chair.

But Sibyl couldn't let the occasion pass without comment. "We should have known that sooner or later somebody would turn up, even in this—"

"Backwater?" suggested Auburn.

"—who knew Arch or Todd," she said. "But when I looked up the other night and saw Deirdre standing over there in the doorway grinning at me, I panicked, because she know them both. So as soon as I could get away from her, I found Todd and told him to get out of the house before she saw him. But, by accident, she heard his voice, and recognized it, and—"

"Will you shut up?" snarled Junghans, whose anxiety was evolving into cold fury. "If we have the right to remain silent, I'm not going to sit here and let you dig our graves with that perpetually mobile tongue of yours!"

"Our graves? Did I choke that insufferable woman to death in a house full of people? Do I forge Arch's name on those royalty checks every quarter? To this day I don't know what you did with his body."

That night, after watching a garbled version of the arrest on the eleven o'clock news, Auburn decided that the case had ended smoothly enough to justify his customary victory celebration—a bedtime snack of sharp cheddar cheese on ginger snaps, with Concord grape juice.

He was just sitting down at the kitchen table when the telephone rang. The caller was Kestrel at the forensic lab; he rarely slept and apparently never read newspapers or watched television. "Got some fresh evidence in this Gorell case," he said. "I found a papier-mâché mask in a plastic trash bag in the garbage at four-two-oh Charleroi. It's been damaged, and it has human bloodstains on it that don't match the victim's blood type." He fell silent, perhaps waiting for Auburn to erupt in expressions of gratitude and awe.

Auburn pinched his nostrils together. "Thank you for calling the Department of Useless Information," he intoned. "If you are using a rotary-dial phone . . ." 🐦

ACES AND EIGHTS

DAVID EDGERLEY GATES

The card game in the Alhambra was headed for trouble, anybody could see that, and when the card players kicked back their chairs and turned over the table, Placido Geist hooked his elbows on the bar to watch the entertainment. In the bad old days, somebody would certainly have pulled a knife or a gun, and the argument would have ended with one or another of the men in the game dead on the floor, but this was the tail end of 1917, after all, and even in the Texas Panhandle civilization of a kind had arrived. The bouncers stepped in and a town constable showed up in short order. One of the card players gave the constable some lip, and the constable slapped the man with the barrels of his shotgun. It laid the damn fool's scalp open, and the sight of his injury sobered the others up.

The constable, a man named Billy Dollar, walked over to the bar and stood Placido Geist to a whiskey.

Billy himself drank rarely. He had Kiowa blood in him and claimed that liquor gave him windy bowels, but some people said he didn't trust a drunken Indian, himself included. Placido Geist had been acquainted with Billy the better part of twenty years, off and on, and he'd never seen him drunk or foolish. He thanked Billy for the drink and took a cautious taste. It was coarse stuff, grain alcohol cut with bitters and Jamaican ginger, flavored with tobacco, watered milk passing for cream. Like so much else these days, you couldn't trust to appearances.

"The last I heard, you were chasing renegades, south of the Rio Grande," Billy Dollar remarked.

"I found them," Placido Geist said.

"There was a fair reward posted, as I recall."

Placido Geist nodded. "I'm headed into Amarillo to collect from the railroad," he told him.

"You were to stay over, me and the missus got an extra room, indoor lavatory right down the hall," he said, smiling. "Few improvements, civic and otherwise, the last time I recollect you were in these parts."

Placido Geist glanced around the saloon and turned his gaze back to Billy Dollar.

"All right, it ain't much," Billy admitted.

Buffalo Flats had been one of the tough cowtowns on the trails north but went into decline as the railheads were pushed south and west and made the big cattle drives unnecessary. Then the oil boom came and the Flats filled up with wild-catters and rough-necks, along with the usual custom that followed them for the easy money to be had: whores, dips, card sharps, barbers and bankers, clergymen and carpetbaggers.

**The artifact was pale and perfect,
as delicate as the petals of a
rose . . . It was a child's ear.**

Billy Dollar cleared his throat. "You be in the market for a commission?" he asked.

Placido Geist was a bounty hunter by trade. He was well past sixty, and Billy wasn't far behind. The question sounded a trifle wistful.

"The reason I ask," Billy went on, "is that I know of a man in difficulties, with need of private law."

"Why private?"

Billy sucked on his teeth, awkwardly. "He's an Indian," he said at last.

"Kiowa or Osage?"

"Kiowa, my mother's second cousin," Billy said. "He's a rich Indian, mind you. He can afford to pay the freight. Plain fact is, though, he can't leave it to local authorities."

"What's it about, Billy?" Placido Geist asked him.

"His daughter's been kidnapped. For ransom. Jennie's nine years old."

Jacob Nighthorse had made his money in the oil business. He had leases in the Cimarron Strip of Oklahoma that brought him substantial royalties. Nighthorse made no pretense of being a plain man. His house was Greek Revival, three stories high, with yew hedges planted as a windbreak outside and oak wainscoting in the halls. Placido Geist met him in the study. The slate for the billiard table had been brought overland from St. Louis, and the books ordered from Philadelphia and Boston. The felt on the billiard table was scuffed from use, and the bound books had every evidence of being read. Nighthorse was a widower, with time on his hands.

Placido Geist looked at the shelved titles. Bought by the yard but

much handled since. Dickens, Trollope, Sir Walter Scott. He took down a copy of Scott's *Quentin Durward* and leafed through it. A somewhat silly book, as he remembered, but an exciting one, filled with daredevil adventures and hair's-breadth escapes. A pallid hero, but vivid villains. He returned the novel to the shelf. Jake Nighthorse offered him a drink. It was imported whiskey from Oban, Scotland, and Placido Geist didn't turn it down.

Billy Dollar stood quietly to one side, watching them. The oil man hadn't offered Billy a whiskey.

"How long has she been missing?" Placido Geist asked.

"Just over a week," Nighthorse said.

"And how much are they asking?"

"A hundred thousand dollars."

"Can you raise that kind of money?"

"I already have."

"You intend to pay it?"

"I want my daughter back," Nighthorse said.

Placido Geist took a sip of his single malt. "And where do I deliver the ransom?" he asked.

"You're to meet a man in Palo Duro, those are my only instructions," Nighthorse said. "From there the arrangements are up to you." Nighthorse seemed like a man who was keeping his feelings in check, but fury radiated off him like an odor, or the chime of a bell. "I mean to leave the arrangements to you," Nighthorse said, significantly.

"You're giving me a fair degree of latitude," Placido Geist remarked, choosing not to read his meaning.

"I trust you to get the job done," Nighthorse said.

Placido Geist deliberated, but there was no delicate way to put it. "What if your daughter is already dead?" he asked.

"Find the men who took her," Nighthorse told him. "I don't expect them to be brought back alive."

Placido Geist had understood this from the first.

Nighthorse handed the bounty hunter a small lacquered box figured with elaborate joinery. Placido Geist opened the lid. There was a linen handkerchief folded inside. He undid it cautiously. It took him a moment to realize what he was looking at. He hadn't seen anything like it since he'd scouted against the Apache. The artifact was pale and perfect and curled at the edges, as delicate as the wax impression of a Nautilus shell or the petals of a rose pressed between the pages of a book.

It was a child's ear, severed from the scalp.

"I mean to come along, provided you'll have me," Billy said. "I

can still sit a saddle, if you can."

Placido Geist nodded. "I figured as much," he said. "Not that I wouldn't appreciate the company, but how does your wife feel? And you're taking time away from your job. The town pays your salary, not Nighthorse."

"A hundred a month and found," Billy Dollar said. "I think I can do better, as does my wife."

"Your share of the reward, provided we're able to find the girl." Nighthorse had made it clear that his hundred thousand dollars was blood money. Failing the recovery of his child, the ransom was a bounty on her kidnappers.

"I mean to earn it," Billy said.

"You intended this from the first," Placido Geist said.

Billy nodded. "You were approachable," he said.

"And you used me as leverage."

"Nighthorse was reluctant to put the business in my charge. You have a reputation I can't match."

"My reputation, as you call it, is questionable."

"I've got the stomach for killing, if it comes to that."

"It may," Placido Geist said. "Is this family feeling, you and the Nighthorse girl?"

"She calls me Uncle Billy," Billy said. "It's a courtesy title. My own girl died of the smallpox when she was nine. Jennie Nighthorse is that age now. Could be I'm trying to make it up to her."

His daughter, did he mean? "Do your explaining at home, Billy, not to me," Placido Geist told him. "I can't give you an alibi."

"I don't need one," Billy Dollar said.

He'd tried his hand at other things over the years, but he had a gift for tracking men. It was his calling, you might say, and it had made him something close to famous in the border country, although nothing on the order of the Pinkerton agent Charlie Siringo, who'd pursued Butch Cassidy, or some of the frontier lawmen of an earlier time, like Hickok or Earp. Nobody had yet written a dime novel about Placido Geist, and even someone who knew his name wouldn't have recognized him if they passed him on the street. Short and rumped, and in fact rather stout, he cut an unremarkable figure on his bandy legs and looked the part of a broken-down old cowboy. It wasn't common knowledge that he'd killed forty men in his career, more than the notorious Texas gunhawk and braggart Wes Hardin. He was of mixed blood, his father a German immigrant, his mother *mestizo*, which accounted for his queer name. Some on the Mexican side had taken to calling him

el Espectro, since it was said you never saw him until it was too late, but he'd grown up in a stern school, where the margin for error was the difference between staying alive or winding up dead.

Placido Geist and Billy Dollar boarded a train in Amarillo, which took them south through the Tierra Blanca to the whistle-stop at Nazareth. Jake Nighthorse had arranged for a car and driver to meet them there, a 1904 Oldsmobile that could run on either alcohol or gasoline, serviced and driven by a cheerful Negro named Jupiter Cox. He loaded their gear into the car and the three of them proceeded over the unimproved road to Palo Duro. They wore dusters and goggles to protect them from the alkali of the Llano Estacado, which blew into the open vehicle, sticking to their exposed skin and sifting down inside the scarves around their necks. They coughed and chugged their way into the town, looking as if they'd been dredged in flour. The wind scoured the pueblo with particles so fine they would have passed through cheesecloth. Billy Dollar dismounted from the automobile and went off to find a hotel room, hopefully one that provided running water. Placido Geist got down more slowly, feeling his age, and brushed at his coat.

The livery stable also served as what the owner was pleased to announce on his sign as a GARAGE, which meant some of the stalls stored other cars, and he now offered repairs. He was an eager young man; his farrier did double duty at the forge, turning out the odd replacement part as well as shaping horseshoes. They were much taken with the Oldsmobile and the ground it had been able to cover. Placido Geist asked if he could hire a decent pair of horses, but when he saw what was on offer, he determined to shop around for outright purchase of mounts. He wasn't keen to spend money he hadn't yet earned, but Nighthorse was being generous with expenses.

Jupiter Cox unpacked the luggage on the porch of the hotel and said he'd sooner spend the night in the stables with the automobile, in which he took a proprietary interest. Placido Geist saw no harm in this and respected the man's dedication, although it was tempered by necessity; Cox was responsible for the car.

Billy Dollar had gotten them adjoining rooms on the second floor, with a shared private bath in between. The hotel had steam heat from a boiler in the basement, and there was a tub with spigots. Billy had already run a bath and was soaking in it. Placido Geist unpacked his gear, laying it on the bed. Billy talked to him through the open door as he soaped up in the tub. "You figure they'll contact us here?" Billy asked.

"They know we're coming," Placido Geist said. He set out his toiletries on the bedspread and unwrapped a break-top Smith & Wesson .44 with a nine-inch barrel, along with a box of cartridges. He also had smaller gun, a single-action Colt Sheriff's Model with a three-inch barrel that he carried at the small of his back, next to his kidneys. In his experience, it didn't matter whether you hid a gun in your hat. If it was always there, you knew where to find it. The big guns, his own .45-70 Sharps Borchardt with the heavy barrel and Billy's .32 Winchester, were over in the corner of the room with their saddles and other tack. Placido Geist had brought along an ornate Mexican saddle, chased with silver and absurdly heavy. The bellman had struggled with it carrying it upstairs and complained that gold coins or lead fishing weights might well have been stitched into the saddle skirts. Placido Geist tipped him a paper dollar.

"If they think we have the money with us they may well try and take it away from us," Billy Dollar remarked.

"They well might," Placido Geist said. He opened a small case on the bed and thoughtfully assembled a stubby shotgun. It was a twelve-gauge Parker hammerless side-by-side with double triggers, the barrels taken off at eighteen inches. Inside twenty feet, the spread of shot was palm-sized. Beyond that, it was ineffective. He loaded double-O buckshot in the left-hand barrel, which fired first, and a lead slug in the right. The slug was split across the face, so it would fragment when it hit bone. He closed the breech.

Billy Dollar sat up in the tub, rinsing off his upper body, and began lathering his face to shave. For a man who was part Indian, his beard was heavy enough to shave every other day. "Tell me," he said, talking around the brush, "what do you make of Nighthorse?"

Placido Geist was stripping off his clothes. "He wants his daughter back," he said. "Absent that, he wants the bandits that took her dead. Or preferably both. Any man who cuts off a child's ear to show he's in earnest is vermin."

"You ever take scalps?" Billy Dollar asked him.

Placido Geist sat down on the edge of the bed and tugged off his boots, grunting with the effort. "Are you going to run me a fresh bath, or did you expect me to use that greasy water a second time?" he asked.

The hotel featured a dining room that was the nearest thing to a decent restaurant Palo Duro had to offer, and the townsfolk crowded in on Thursday nights for the house special, chicken and dumplings, mashed potatoes and gravy, and a helping of soggy

greens on the side that came out of a tin. Individual tables were hard to come by, so there was family seating, like a boarding house. After the two old hired guns took a place they were joined by a whiskey drummer from El Paso and a smartly dressed octaroon who looked to be either a pimp or a gambler. It was the octaroon who caught their attention when he looked down at the food and

We take each other seriously. no?" L'Ouverture inquired. "Or would you like to see her other ear?"

made a sly remark about a sow's ear and a silk purse, and then winked at them gravely before picking up his silverware.

They met him after dinner in the saloon bar. He introduced himself as Aristide L'Ouverture.

L'Ouverture obviously expected Placido Geist to spring for the drinks. He asked for cognac. Placido Geist bought the Creole a brandy. "What else are we buying?" he asked him. "Not a sow's ear."

"Not a full-grown pig, but a young farrow."

"Damaged goods," Placido Geist commented.

L'Ouverture smiled. "We take each other seriously, no?" he inquired. "Or would you like to see her other ear?"

"You've made your point," Placido Geist told him.

"Where, however, is the promised silk purse?" the Creole asked him with his Cajun lilt. "Not in your automobile, I rest assured. So, where?"

"The money will be paid on delivery," Placido Geist said to him, mildly. "I'm to make the arrangements at my discretion."

"Excuse me," L'Ouverture corrected him. "Arrangements will be made at *my* discretion."

"There are only two of us," Placido Geist said, indicating Billy Dollar. "We were sent to conclude a deal, nothing more or less. A time and a place. The price is already agreed."

"Then we negotiate a time and a place," L'Ouverture told him. "South of here is Sulphur Draw, no more than a day's ride across the Llano Estacado. You know this country well enough to find it?"

Placido Geist nodded. "Below the Caprock," he said.

"You will be met there."

"How do we make ourselves known?"

"You had no need of it here," L'Ouverture said.

"How do we know the girl's still alive?"

L'Ouverture grinned. "How do I know you have the money?"

"If the girl's dead, you won't see a dime," Placido Geist said.

"Men of good will act in good faith," L'Ouverture said.

"I have no reason to trust you," Placido Geist told him. "You've mistreated a child, disfigured her, even murdered her by now. You mean to kill us both and steal the ransom."

"Let's be frank," L'Ouverture said. "You're hard men to kill, or you wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be here, if it weren't for the money. And if the girl is dead, there's no trade, so I have nothing to gain. This is a simple business transaction. There's no personal animus involved. Why can't we be dignified about it?"

"Then why not make the trade here?"

L'Ouverture shrugged. "We're suspicious of each other, and with good reason," he said.

"I won't cheat you if the girl's alive, and if not, you'll get what you deserve."

The octaroon smiled. "If you try and cheat us, the girl will get worse than she deserves," he said. "I have associates, even more prudent than I am. You have heard the name, perhaps, of Balafré?" He pronounced it, teasingly, in the French manner, BAH-ah-FRAY.

Placido Geist gave no sign of it. "We'll do what you ask," he said. "Sulphur Draw, the day after tomorrow."

"Two days' time, then," L'Ouverture said, not unpleasantly.

He put his empty glass down on the bar and sauntered out.

"No better than a Comanchero," Billy Dollar muttered.

"No worse, either," Placido Geist said.

"Worse would be hard to stomach," Billy said. "There's something shifty about that Creole, not just being a high yeller in a dude outfit."

"It's my belief he means to murder us in our beds," Placido Geist commented.

Billy nodded. "I mean to sleep light," he said.

They took turns sleeping. Billy had the first watch. They'd plumped up pillows under the bedclothes. Placido Geist slept in the bathtub fully dressed, with his knees up, hunched in a blanket. Billy Dollar sat on the commode with the sawed-off shotgun in his lap. It was past midnight when they changed places, Placido Geist restless and stiff, Billy complaining of sore hams. Billy folded his big body into the tub and shifted around awkwardly, but made no more remark about it. He settled down after a spell, holding his pistol to his chest, and was soon breathing loudly through his mouth, his face slack as an infant's. The only light came from a gas lamp outside the hotel, shining in the bedroom windows, but it was almost completely dark in the lavatory. Placido Geist let

himself relax and listen to the background sounds, the building shifting its weight, the groan of plumbing, a drunk stumbling by in the street below, the sigh of Billy's breath. He was waiting for a noise that might seem out of place, but none came. He peered at his biscuit watch and then put it away. He considered his sins, which were many.

The old manhunter came out of a light doze, listening hard, and reached out to lay a hand on Billy's chest.

Billy started awake and then lay absolutely still.

There was the faint scrape of metal on metal again, perhaps a brass key turning in a tumbler lock. Billy sat up carefully and got his legs underneath him. Placido Geist rose to his feet but didn't move away from the toilet.

Billy eased himself up to his full height. He cocked his weapon thoughtfully, pressing the trigger and closing his other hand over the cylinder as he brought back the hammer, so there was only a single stifled click as the cylinder turned and locked. Billy let the pressure off the trigger.

Placido Geist slid his right foot across the floor, followed with his left. The floorboards didn't squeak. He leaned against the doorjamb and peered out of the lavatory toward his bedroom door. He saw the knob begin to turn, slowly and deliberately. Placido Geist glanced at Billy. Billy put one leg out of the tub, let it take his full weight and quietly followed with the other. Placido Geist held his breath.

Billy moved silently, heel-and-toe, into the opposite doorway, which gave on the adjoining bedroom. He looked back and nodded.

Placido Geist didn't wait for the men in the hallway to signal each other. He planted his feet, rested the butt of the scattergun against his hip, and let off a round. The buckshot in the left barrel blew out a six-inch hole around the doorknob and shattered the hand that was holding it, taking it off at the wrist. The man shrieked.

Billy's gun boomed three times in the other room.

Placido Geist fired the second barrel of the shotgun. The split slug caught the man in the corridor just below the breastbone, knocking him into the far wall. Placido Geist broke open the shotgun and reloaded before he stepped through the splintered door into the hallway. His man sagged to the floor dead. Fifteen feet away, the Creole lay helpless, two rounds through his chest. Billy came out of his door, glancing right and left, and then looked at the men they'd just shot.

"Only two of them?" he asked.

"There were only two of us," Placido Geist said.

The breath rasped in the octaroon's lungs, and even as they stood by, he choked on his blood and died. Placido Geist sucked on his teeth, frustrated.

"This may be awkward to explain to Aristide's associates in Sulphur Draw," Billy remarked.

"Not if they knew him for the greedy scoundrel he was," the old bounty hunter observed.

There were five of them in the gang. Three of them had taken the girl, and two had stayed behind to deliver the ransom demand to Jacob Nighthorse and to see what steps he took. They didn't expect immediate pursuit, not if Nighthorse wanted his daughter back alive. L'Ouverture had devised the kidnapping as well as the method of letting Nighthorse know they meant business. He'd peeled the girl's ear off himself, fastidious as a surgeon, and taken savage pleasure in its neatness. He considered himself both stylish and clever, but proved to be too clever for his own good. Death had come to him as a rude surprise, as it comes to most men. The man called Balafré would not have been surprised by L'Ouverture's death.

Balafré was brutal, but cautious, and thought the Creole a preening fool, overconfident and condescending. The scar that gave Balafré his name split his upper lip and nostril and scored his cheekbone, up alongside the corner of his left eye. He was probably lucky the Mexican with the knife hadn't blinded him, but the Mex was lucky he died quickly. Balafré would have preferred to take more time with it, but he was in more of a hurry to stay alive. You played what cards you were dealt, and only learned the game when you played for more than you could afford to lose.

They'd brought the girl down the western slope of the Caprock escarpment, skirting the tableland and keeping to the trees, where there was both water and cover, and deadfall to make campfires. The girl hadn't whimpered, although the skin of her inner thighs was chafed from days on horseback. The man with the scar respected her for it, putting it up to her Indian blood. He himself was part Mescalero, and didn't trouble her with conversation. He knew she was already as good as dead, and unlike the octaroon, he had no need to make her suffer unnecessary humiliations. When he killed her, he meant to do it cleanly, without fuss or warning. The girl had no way of knowing this. She was perhaps too young to anticipate such a thing as her own sudden end. Balafré had grown old in the ways of death, having seen so much of it. He was unsentimental about his own chances, or anybody else's.

The other two men were not of his choosing. One was an albino boy, quick with a gun or a knife and good with horses or pack animals, but without social skills. He kept to himself, once camp was pitched, and spoke little. The second man called himself Beaudry but probably answered to half a dozen others. He made more of an effort to keep the girl comfortable, but she shrank from his clumsy courtesies. She mistrusted his solicitude and chose the man with the scar as more reliable, or at least indifferent. Her confidence was of course misplaced, but Balafré understood it. He didn't trust Beaudry himself, and chose not to leave him alone with the girl for any longer than necessary. Beaudry had unhealthy appetites, like the Creole, and was only waiting for an opportunity to indulge them. If the albino boy were odd enough, with his stringy, pale hair and washed-out eyes, and his unnerving manner, cringing like a dog who'd been badly treated, but all too ready to snap if you made to pet him, he was still dependable. He wouldn't try and rape the Nighthorse girl. Then again, he probably wouldn't try to protect her, either, so Balafré determined the sensible course was simply to cut Beaudry's throat when the time came. And that time would come soon enough.

They were holed up in an old adobe under the Caprock, some distance from the settlement at Sulphur Draw. This was the part of the Creole's plan that disturbed Balafré. It was isolated, but isolation wasn't safety. Balafré didn't think the men Nighthorse would send would be careless or inexperienced, and he already suspected what had happened. The octaroon had counted on being able to ambush Nighthorse's men in Palo Duro, and he'd hinted at some obscure advantage, but nothing was that easy. Balafré was more patient than most, and knew the value of stillness, but he also knew that other men were not to be relied on. The only sure thing you could count on was the unexpected.

In this case, that might prove disagreeable. He was probably better off to cut his losses, but he was divided in his mind. There was a lot of money to be had if he waited. Usually his decisions were severe and arbitrary, like the weather. He found it confusing, having to balance this equation, and had to study on it.

They found Jupiter Cox dead in the stable, his skull split.

"This is a wicked bunch," Billy Dollar said, somewhat taken aback. "That man was harmless."

"One of us should have warned him last night, after we spoke

with L'Ouverture," Placido Geist said. "I entirely forgot about Mr. Cox, and now I'm responsible for his murder."

"We have to wire Jacob Nighthorse, to send somebody for the automobile," Billy said.

"L'Ouverture as good as told us he'd had somebody search the car," Placido Geist muttered, still aggravated with himself.

"They killed him when he got in the way," Billy said.

"They murdered the Negro for sport, like as not," Placido Geist told him. He hitched the heavy saddle onto his hip and hoisted the big Sharps. "Whether or not we find the girl alive, these are surely men who'd benefit from a hanging."

"You think she's still alive?"

"I can't think otherwise," Placido Geist told him.

It wasn't yet sunup. They'd answered what questions were asked by a Palo Duro deputy marshal after the shooting had woken up half the guests in the hotel, but the marshal had taken them at their word it was self-defense. Billy carried a badge, after all, and Placido Geist had a reputation that went before him. The marshal had told them to go back to bed and present themselves before the town magistrate in the morning. They took advantage of this parole to gather their possibles from the hotel and repair to the garage. The dead chauffeur was an inconvenience as well as an affront, a possible obstacle to their leaving, and Placido Geist felt time was short. Much as he regretted the insult to the deputy marshal's courtesy, he had no choice. Any later difficulties could be papered over with Nighthorse's money, but in the meantime, there was more pressing business.

Billy woke the sleeping stableboy, no doubt lucky not to have been awake earlier to witness the murder, and Placido Geist picked out the two best-looking horses he could find from the sorry string in the corral. They were in no position to dicker. Placido Geist simply left two hundred dollars with the boy, an outrageous price, and hoped the owner would see at least part of it. They were already in flight from a manslaughter inquest, and being charged with horse theft would only make things worse.

They rode south. The country was so featureless that a yucca on the horizon was a landmark. The Llano Estacado, the Staked Plain, took its name from the early days of Spanish exploration. The first white men to traverse this barren landscape had marked their route with stakes, a method handed down from the Roman centuries who crossed North Africa, to find their way back. The soldiers of the Catholic majesty of Spain had left their bones in this dreary expanse. Only the colorful name survived, but little else.

The color itself was bleached out of the ground. To the human eye, it was an unforgiving waste, hard as an anvil, the sand itself hammered and calcified, like the bones of the conquistadors.

"Hard to imagine they took Jennie Nighthorse across this," Billy Dollar said. "A sheltered nine year old, convent-bred. I doubt she'd stand the journey."

Placido Geist's horse stumbled, and then found her footing again. He straightened in the saddle and glanced at Billy. "We can only hope she's a young woman of stamina," he said.

"I'm running low on stamina myself," Billy said.

"Try not to run low on spit," Placido Geist remarked. They had water enough for the horses, if they were short on it themselves, but it wasn't worrisome.

More troubling was the Creole's mention of Balafre, or Cicatriz, as the Mexicans called him: Placido Geist had heard of him before. His given name was Vermilion, and he was a ruthless outlaw by reputation, but to the old bounty hunter's knowledge he'd never raided north of the Pecos or been party to so carefully executed a crime. It was out of character. The man was reported to be cruel but uncalculating, a methodical killer, but not the sort to think through such a scheme as the Nighthorse kidnapping. He was unlikely to chop logic or bargain for the girl's life, and would as soon murder both his hostage and his partners and make a run for Mexico alone to live another day, leaving the money behind him. Such a man was difficult to outwit, since he lived by his wits, and had neither character nor vanity to play on.

They made good time, and reached Sulphur Draw near sundown, after pushing the horses hard. At first blush, the settlement looked to be a sad and stunted ghost town on the edge of nowhere, but as they rode closer they saw the telegraph line coming up from the south and some new buildings scattered about the outskirts, the lumber still raw.

"Signs of life," Billy Dollar remarked.

"Few and far between," Placido Geist said.

They pulled up and sat their tired horses in the thickening twilight, gazing across the dusty ground at the town.

"I don't imagine the hotel has indoor plumbing," Billy said to the bounty hunter. "My bones could use another hot soak."

"We'll be lucky if there is a hotel," Placido Geist said to him. "Or even a livery."

They rode on in and dismounted in the last light of day. The town seemed as weary and dispirited as they were. There was a stable, though, and they were able to board their horses.

They walked up the street, stopping at the jail, but there was nobody there. They crossed over to the nearest saloon, an unprepossessing establishment that didn't have much custom. The bartender directed them to the faro game at the back, where they found the local sheriff sullenly losing. He was in a poor temper and showed a marked disinclination to involve himself in their business.

They retired to the bar. Placido Geist ordered a whiskey and was mildly surprised when Billy did the same. Billy knocked back his drink with alacrity and asked for another.

"He lacks enthusiasm, for a lawman," Billy Dollar said.

"Nothing in it for him," Placido Geist said.

"We could sweeten the pot, or don't you want to share?"

"It's not the money, or the credit we might get," Placido Geist said. "If we let it be known what we were carrying, we could generate a little too much enthusiasm. The bandits might get scared off. Let alone the fact that we'd be worth more dead than alive to anybody who wanted to try their luck. Better safe than sorry."

"They tried it in Palo Duro, and we fought them off."

Placido Geist had been thinking about Palo Duro. It bothered him that the Creole seemed to think he could get the money without an assault heavier in manpower, but he didn't voice his doubts out loud. "Let's wait and see if our man makes an offer we can shake hands on."

Billy Dollar picked up his shot glass and regarded Placido Geist with what might have been misgiving, but made no comment before he drank. They bought the bottle and removed to a nearby table.

The two of them sat there the better part of an hour, watching the flies circle and making idle conversation. Billy, unaccustomed to drink, was feeling his liquor, growing downright lugubrious.

"You recall a man named Bright?" he asked. "He was the law in Sweetwater for a while."

"Tall, boisterous sort? I believe he got himself killed in Abilene a few years back."

Billy nodded. "Working the door in a whorehouse."

"I'm sorry to hear he'd sunk so far," Placido Geist said, pouring himself another drink. "No more corrupt than most, as I remember. Affable enough, in a coarse way."

Billy looked around the bar, measuring his future. "Not much to look forward to," he remarked. "Carrying water for the Pinkertons, breaking strikes, or working as a bouncer, listening to whores complain about the custom."

"Don't go mournful on me, Billy," Placido Geist said.

"I prefer to think of it as contemplative," Billy said.

Placido Geist smiled gently. "We could tell one another lies all night," he said. "Let's wonder about dinner and a place to bed down. The men we're here to trade with will likely find us without our help."

Billy shifted his weight uneasily. "I think they already have," he murmured. He pointedly didn't look toward the door.

Placido Geist raised his glass unhurriedly and took a careful sip, letting his eyes rest briefly on the man who'd just come in. He was of middle age, wearing charro pants with silver conchos and a woolen jacket, his sombrero pushed back. When he turned to face them his scar was vivid. The puckered seam caught the light like snakeskin. He lifted his hand amicably in their direction, affecting to have just seen them. Placido Geist put his glass down and left both hands on the table. The man with the scar came over. Billy pushed his chair back to give him room, but the man with the scar was too wary to sit without an invitation.

"Would I recognize your name, you were to give it?" he asked Placido Geist.

Placido Geist told him who he was.

The man with the scar nodded to himself. "That sounds about right," he said. "Jacob Nighthorse would want the best money could buy." He tipped his head toward Billy Dollar. "And the tame Indian?"

"You look part Apache to me," Billy said to him. "Mimbrenño or Mescalero?"

"A man with no head for whiskey shouldn't drink," he said. "I never met a half-breed Kiowa yet who had any head for whiskey, or the stomach for a fight."

Placido Geist made no remark. Billy sat back, crossing his legs, and brought his hand up from under the table without haste. He laid the barrel of the .45 Bisley Colt alongside his thigh, and when he cocked the hammer, it made no more noise than a cricket's wing. Nobody six feet away would have heard it, or even noticed the gun, but the man with the scar was closer than that. He allowed himself a small smile, respectful but disappointed, as if his expectations had been answered.

"Accidents happen," he said to Placido Geist.

"A little accident happened to your friend the Creole back in Palo Duro," Placido Geist said.

"I figured as much," the man with scar said. "Do we deal?" He looked slowly and insolently at Billy Dollar.

Billy remained still and watchful. Placido Geist bobbed his head.

The man with the scar pulled out a chair and sat down.

Placido Geist was leafing through a mental catalog. "You'd be Dick Vermilion, called Balafre or Cicatriz by the Mexicans. Known to be a murderer and desperado. I'd have taken you for an older man."

Cicatriz grinned hugely. "A man is as a man does," he said. "And as for age, I'd have thought you might have dried up and blown away by now. They call a man el Espectro, you expect him to be skin and bones. You two look fat and sassy to me. No offense," he added, glancing at Billy.

"None taken," Billy said.

"She's alive," the outlaw said to Placido Geist.

"That's a start," Placido Geist said.

"You'll want a look at her first," Cicatriz said.

"That would be prudent."

"The two of you come down here to kill me?"

"Only if the girl's already dead," Placido Geist said.

"The octaroon must have underestimated you."

"I think he overestimated himself."

Cicatriz smiled. "How do you want to work it?" he asked.

"Which outcome would you prefer?"

"All of us still standing afterwards."

"You've got the advantage of the ground," Placido Geist said.

"The element of surprise. You've had time to go over the terrain and set up an ambush."

"So you have a suggestion to even the odds."

"I don't trust you not to kill us, and the girl, too."

Cicatriz shrugged. "It goes without saying," he remarked. "Just as I don't trust you to let me ride off with another man's money."

"I'm instructed to bring Nighthorse's daughter back to him alive," Placido Geist said. "Failing that, to kill every one of you. It's your choice."

"You're not leaving me room to swing a rope."

"I don't mean to."

"I've still got the girl, though."

"Which is all that's keeping you alive."

Cicatriz sat back and studied him for a moment. "I believe I might have met my match, old man," he said.

"If you believed that, you would have dry-gulched me at the earliest opportunity. We wouldn't be having this talk."

"L'Ouverture enjoyed spinning out a talk," Cicatriz said.

"Conversation was his weakness," Placido Geist said.

"He was all talk and no sand," Billy Dollar commented.

Cicatriz looked him over with closer attention. "You'd be Nighthorse's cousin, the constable," he said. "Getting his girl back means a preferment for you."

Billy didn't bother to answer that.

"What if just the two of us meet, out in the open?" Placido Geist asked Cicatriz.

"How does that further?"

"That's what it comes down to, in the end."

"You're probably right enough," Cicatriz said.

"You care to pick the place?"

"About three miles west of here there's a dry wash and a broken-down adobe. You can make it out from a distance. The two of you come at daybreak but stand clear of the cabin until we take each other's measure." He grinned. "Outside of rifle range. I'll meet you halfway, close enough to keep you covered from the adobe. If the Kiowa has me in his sights, neither side has the advantage of the other."

"I don't know how many men you've got."

"I'm not spoiling for a fight," Cicatriz said.

Placido Geist nodded. "Done, then," he said.

"You're known to be a dead shot. I'd have suspicion of you, you were to send this Indian in your place."

"You kill me, you won't get the money," Placido Geist said.

"You kill me, you won't get the girl," Cicatriz said.

Placido Geist nodded again. "Fair is fair," he said.

The man with the scar stood up from the table. "I'll be waiting for you, then, tomorrow morning, out in the scrub." He glanced at Billy and smiled without humor. "There'll be less talk and more sand."

They were in position well before daylight. It was bitterly cold, with a sharp wind off the escarpment, and the two old men blew on their hands and shuffled their feet, huddling up against the horses for warmth.

They'd dismounted a ways back and led the animals forward in the dark. Billy had the better night vision and signaled a halt when they came to the slight rise. He crept up it to scout the terrain ahead while Placido Geist held the reins.

Billy slithered back down and got heavily to his feet. His breath frosted in the starlight. "It's about a mile distant," he said. "Looks pretty much deserted, but that's what you might expect."

"They wouldn't be showing any light," Placido Geist said.

"Vermilion knows better than to build a fire if he figures us to be here early, which he does."

They both understood it was probably a trap, but they hadn't been able to work out any better way. Agreeing to the rendezvous was their only chance of recovering Jennie Nighthorse alive, even if it got them killed.

"He'll likely have two or three others," Billy said. "They won't all be inside the adobe."

"No," Placido Geist said. "I'd box the compass, if it were me. Put a man off to either side, six or eight hundred yards from the rise, here. It's a consistent feature in the landscape and you'd think it gave us a natural advantage."

"Come dawn, we'd have the sun at our backs," Billy said.

"Makes for a good target, in silhouette."

"You ride down to meet Vermilion, and I show myself, giving you cover, but still out of range of the adobe. One of the men in the brush picks me off, and then Vermilion kills you. I'd do it the same way."

"Simple enough."

"Simple enough if we're dead," Billy said. "I don't admire being taken alive by a breed Apache."

"Then again, if he has his men already in position, they're lying on the cold ground right now," Placido Geist said.

"I'd be getting uncomfortable, it were me," Billy said.

"Might get drowsy, or distracted," Placido Geist said to him. "Go to picking stones out from under my bedroll, restless, wanting the time to go faster."

Billy Dollar grinned. His teeth shone very white in the darkness. "A man as careless as that might get himself killed," he said.

"See that you don't," Placido Geist told him.

They hobbled the horses, and the two of them moved off in opposite directions, first circling back, behind their position, and then flanking forward, to cast a wider net.

The albino boy was the better shot, and given a task, wouldn't shirk it or turn tail and run. Beaudry had too many weaknesses to be dependable. Cicatriz had already determined he should be disposed of as soon as it was convenient. He'd sent the ash-blond boy into the brush with instructions about who was coming, what to wait for, and when to shoot. Beaudry stayed where Cicatriz could keep an eye on him. Beaudry had at least a single virtue in that he was predictable.

It was the girl who was behaving oddly.

At first, Cicatriz had put it up to her captivity, a resignation to her

situation, an eagerness to please her captors and escape punishment. Many white children taken by the Comanche or other tribes had been known to lose their white ways and adapt to Indian life, refusing to be ransomed back by their birth parents and choosing to stay behind with the savages. Cicatriz had of course said nothing to raise any false hopes in the girl, but she seemed to sense the possibility of deliverance, perhaps to shrink from it. Cicatriz felt the girl's dependence on him was understandable, even natural, given her circumstance, and although he treated her curtly, he found himself unaccountably protective, keeping her from further physical harm, or sexual injury at the hands of Beaudry. But there was more to it, somehow. Here, she was a necessary part of the plot, valued in a way she wouldn't be if she were returned home. Or so it seemed from her apparent devotion to him, as if he were her rescuer, not those two old men he meant to torment, and kill, when the time came. His own ambivalence bothered him. He didn't like being of two minds. He reminded himself that Jennie Nighthorse was a commodity, to be handled like livestock: she was only the means to an end. Still, he was having second thoughts. The girl posed a riddle or harbored a secret or perhaps represented the answer to a question he'd never asked himself before.

It was all very troubling, almost painful. Cicatriz felt as if his head were being squeezed tight in a vise. He knew his anger was unhelpful. It needed an object.

The boy had remained absolutely still, once he'd taken up his position in the scrub, and waited uncomplaining in the chill darkness for sunrise. He didn't shift his weight or scratch at insect bites or relieve himself. Hunkered down inside his heavy coat, his hat beside him on the ground to make his outline less pronounced, he might have been a rock or a stump.

It wasn't sound or movement that had given him away, and Placido Geist almost missed him. Crouched low and moving counter-clockwise, careful of noise, the old bounty hunter had noticed a pale blur only a few yards away and took it for a patch of bare ground. He crept closer, not sure of what it was. It was the crown of the albino's head, his hair almost white.

The wind blew hard off the caprock. The hiss of scraping sand covered the bounty hunter's approach. Only at the last did the boy sense somebody coming up behind him, silent as a ghost.

He looked to save himself, but it was too late. Placido Geist did what had to be done, dispatching the boy quickly and without fuss, using a knife. The albino bled out quickly, jerking only a lit-

tle as Placido Geist held his face in the dirt. He wiped his knife off and sat back, breathing heavily and listening for any sign he'd been heard. There was just the faintest blush of light to the east, the stars beginning to fade, and he was able to better make out the near ground. He debated whether to try and get closer to the adobe. He figured the man with the scar could have as many as four men with him, but he didn't think it likely. He'd already lowered the odds, and if Billy had chanced to pick off another one, Cicatriz might be down to only one gunman to protect his back, or none, and the one left behind might be a poor marksman. Placido Geist decided to get back to the horses.

Billy wasn't there, and Placido Geist wondered what his own chances were if the deputy had been taken by surprise himself out there in the scrub. Billy rose slowly from his hiding place in the brush, cradling his six-gun.

"Wasn't sure it was you," Billy said.

"I wasn't sure of you, either, for a minute," Placido Geist said. He was relieved to see him.

"You run across any bandits out there?"

Placido Geist told him what he'd found and what he'd done.

"One down, then," Billy said.

Placido Geist explained his line of thought afterwards.

Billy nodded. "I wouldn't choose to think we're safe as houses, but it takes the edge off," he said. "You still intend to step out there and bandy words with that half-breed, or can I just shoot the son of a bitch when he gets in range?"

Placido Geist went over to his horse and took the Sharps out of his saddle scabbard. He brought it back to Billy. "I'd put more faith in a .45-70 than a .32 Winchester carbine at that distance," he said, handing Billy the buffalo gun.

Cicatriz slept like cat, in snatches, and he was instantly alert when he woke. He heard the girl whimper again and the murmur of Beaudry's voice, cajoling. The man with the scar uncoiled noiselessly and got to his feet. He was across the adobe in less time than it takes to cock a pistol, and when Beaudry looked up at him, no pistol in his hand, taken by surprise and his face thick with goatish stupidity, Cicatriz drove the knife into his throat with such force that it pinned Beaudry's head to the wall.

Cicatriz gathered the girl up in her thin woolen blanket, leaving Beaudry to flop helplessly, clawing at the handle of the knife with both hands. The man with the scar carried the girl away. She seemed

fragile as a bird. Beaudry kicked at the earthen floor, suffocating in his own blood. Cicatriz set the girl down in the open doorway and hunkered next to her, brushing the hair back from her eyes. Her eyes were hot, but not from weeping. Beaudry scuffed his heels on the ground, weakly, and then stopped altogether. She paid him no mind. Cicatriz began speaking to her softly in Spanish, the language for horses and children. She didn't understand the words. He spoke on, not watching Jennie Nighthorse, but looking out through the doorway into the rising sun. It wasn't high enough to warm her yet, but the liquid syllables, even in Cicatriz's harsh accent, seemed to bathe her in light. She took his hand.

Cicatriz glanced down and felt a hollow and abiding sadness deep in his chest. He fell silent.

The girl had spoken little on their journey, but now she did. She told him a story. It was about a king who had lost his wife and had only a young daughter for company. The king was ill-served by one of his trusted advisors, but the princess saw through the man's self-interest. She tried to warn her father. The king was preoccupied with affairs of state and paid her no heed. Unhappily for the princess, the wicked vizier had long ears, and word of her tale-bearing soon reached him. He hatched a scheme with a band of Gypsies, and they carried her off to sell into slavery, but the Gypsy chieftain took pity on the girl, and in time fell under her spell. In the end, knowing she was of royal blood, he made her a queen of his own people.

Cicatriz had listened with close attention. His stormy, disfigured face relaxed. He saw that the wound on the side of her head was completely scabbed over and showed no sign of infection. If her hair were artfully arranged, there would be no visible sign of her injury, later in life, if she were to have such a life. Cicatriz pictured her dressed in white. He was charmed by her earnest telling of the fairy tale. There was a dark history hinted at, but perhaps a happy ending, and he desperately wanted it to come true for her, if not for him.

Through the binoculars, Placido Geist could see the man with the scar crouched in the doorway and the Nighthorse girl. She was still alive, at least. He couldn't make out her condition or what Cicatriz was up to. He was crouched next to her like a bird of prey, but something in his posture seemed more like that of a supplicant, pleading an awkward case.

Placido Geist put the field glasses away and mounted his horse. Billy had moved down off the rise into the brush to give himself a better field of fire, closer to the target. Placido Geist sat his horse in the flat morning sunlight, the tableland receding to an infinite

weary distance even as the horizon appeared to draw closer. The sun was a few diameters above the edge of the earth, like a disk punched in a piece of paper. Everything was crisp and oblong, early shadows taking on definition, their outlines foreshortening.

Cicatríz stood up and stepped through the doorway, into the light. He shaded his eyes with his hands, then tugged his sombrero over his head from behind, squaring it. He started forward. Placido Geist nudged the horse with his spurs and urged her down the slope, the mare still skittish and uneasy from a restless night. She swerved her head from side to side, looking to crop a cholla blossom or some greasy desert grass. Placido Geist pulled the bit back, not sawing at her mouth, but

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straightening her neck. The mare moved sideways a little, recalcitrant. Placido Geist pulled up and got

down, leading her on by the reins. He and Cicatríz walked slowly closer to each other, both afoot now.

He could use the horse for cover, putting her between him and the adobe. Placido Geist thought it was curious that Cicatríz hadn't brought a horse with him. It spoke to the man's carelessness, or his lack of fear. Placido Geist didn't think the man with the scar was careless. He must figure he had an ace up his sleeve, but Placido Geist didn't know what it might be. It didn't matter, if they got caught in the open. They stopped, some twenty paces apart, taking one another's measure. The two men regarded each other. It was the classic distance for a gunfight. They both wanted to get closer, if only to make a rifle shot harder, for either party, but Placido Geist was thinking particularly about someone watching from the adobe. He had every confidence Billy Dollar could notch the wings off a fly at a quarter mile with the Sharps, and the man with the scar obviously thought likewise.

"I see you left your saddle gun behind," Cicatríz said.

"This comes down to the two of us," Placido Geist told him. "I killed the boy in the scrub an hour ago."

"Age counts against youth," Cicatríz remarked idly.

"What's your play going to be?" Placido Geist asked him.

"You can't have her back," the man with the scar said.

"We agreed on the price, a hundred thousand dollars."

"You can keep the money," Cicatriz said.

"She belongs with her family," Placido Geist said.

"She's safer with me," Cicatriz said.

"Safer than with her father?"

"She's not safe with her father," Cicatriz said.

Placido Geist didn't understand. "What are you saying?"

"She's being interfered with," Cicatriz said.

"Interfered with?" Placido Geist stared, baffled by the man. "Are you trying to tell me that Jacob Nighthorse is taking liberties with his own daughter?"

"Not her father. He's blind to it. He can't keep her from harm," Cicatriz told him.

"Who will, then?"

"I mean to."

"You're on the run, a wanted man," Placido Geist said.

"That's no disqualification."

"The girl can't stay with you. She needs medical attention and family affection, an education, some kind of future."

"I'll take her south of the border to Zacatecas, and leave her with the Sisters of Guadalupe. There the nuns can raise her properly. She'll be better off."

"An orphan, in a Mexican convent."

"I was a foundling," the gunfighter said.

"Look where it's gotten you," Placido Geist said.

"I won't give her up," Cicatriz insisted stubbornly.

"I find it hard to credit that you're a man of sentimental nature," Placido Geist said.

"Think whatever you want," Cicatriz said, "but why would I be caught in a lie, when by rights I should be indifferent as to whether the girl lives or dies?"

Placido Geist had the nine-inch Smith stuck in the front of his belt, but he suddenly didn't want to fight the outlaw. He realized that Cicatriz, like any other man, had once been a child himself unprotected from adult predators. But it made little difference why. What counted was that there had been an abrupt shift in the balance between them, and Placido Geist felt less than confident where his loyalties lay.

"What would you do in my place?" Cicatriz asked him.

"Much the same, if I believed it to be true," Placido Geist said.

Cicatriz allowed himself a slight smile. "We believe what we choose," he said. "Did you bring Nighthorse's money, or were you going to ambush us one by one?"

"I brought it," Placido Geist said.

"How much did you get to keep when you hunted us down?"

"All of it, if the girl were dead."

"That's a fair price to put on a man's head."

"Just your ears," Placido Geist told him.

Cicatriz nodded. "Take the money back to Nighthorse," he said.

"Tell him my ears were too expensive. Tell him his life is cheap." He turned away.

"Vermilion," Placido Geist said. He drew the .44 Smith.

Cicatriz kept his back turned. "I'll kill you to keep her," he said quietly, "or you'll kill me to get her. It's not needful, either way."

Placido Geist blew his breath out and lowered the gun.

Cicatriz pivoted slowly, his arms out at his sides. His own pistol was in a cross-draw holster under his vest. "Did the Creole tell you more than you wanted to hear in Palo Duro?"

"Damn your eyes," Placido Geist said, exasperated.

Cicatriz shrugged. "Why isn't she already dead?" he asked.

"Walk away from this."

Cicatriz grinned. "I would have shot you in the back, old man," he said, keeping his hands spread. "I might, if I get the chance."

"Do you want such a chance?" Placido Geist asked him.

"Only if I can give the girl one," Cicatriz said.

"You're asking something I can't offer."

"I offer myself," Cicatriz said, simply. He folded his arms, his hand moving that much closer to his gun, but still not quite reaching for it, deliberately provocative.

The .45-70 Government was a slow bullet that tumbled at a distance, but it hit before the sound carried. The heavy slug caught Cicatriz just to the left of his collarbone and nicked the aorta, shattering his left shoulder. It knocked him clean off his feet in a spray of bloody gristle, and he skidded across the hardpan, smearing bright arterial blood on the sand.

Placido Geist took a startled step backwards, bumping unexpectedly into the horse. The boom of the Sharps racketed over the alkali and died away. The old bounty hunter dropped to the ground, but there was no fire from the adobe. He crawled over to the man with the scar. "How many others?" Placido Geist asked him. "Who else is in the shack with the girl?"

Cicatriz was panting. He was short of breath, and his eyes had gone wide and staring, the pupils enlarged.

"How many others?" Placido Geist demanded hoarsely.

Cicatriz tried to focus. "That damn Kiowa," he muttered. "He's better than I thought." He coughed up wet tissue from his lungs.

"I'll see that she's safe," Placido Geist said. "I promise you that."

"Who'd trust a bushwhacker?" Cicatriz asked him, grimacing.

He coughed again, and died with a sudden shudder.

Placido Geist got to his feet. He saw the girl standing in the doorway of the broken-down adobe, watchful. Nobody else appeared and she seemed to be alone. Placido Geist gathered the reins of his horse and walked her ahead, letting her shy away from the dead man on the ground. He wasn't looking forward to this.

The girl took a step toward him, coming out of the doorway, and then hesitated, looking past him.

Placido Geist glanced back over his shoulder. Billy had caught up his horse and was riding down to the adobe to meet them. Placido Geist turned back toward the mud hut, still leading his horse. He wanted to get there first. How many others? The girl was concerned about something, but it wasn't somebody behind her. He thought about the dead outlaw Cicatriz, and the bargain he'd made with himself that led to his death. There was a piece missing.

Placido Geist was seized with a chilly certainty, as if a shuttered window had opened in his heart and now a cold wind blew in. He quickened his pace. The girl watched him approach. Her gaze was listless and resigned.

He stopped a few steps short of the adobe. "Your father sent me to bring you home," he said to her, gently. "Is there anybody else inside?"

She shook her head. "He killed him," he said.

He knew she meant the man with the scar.

She looked past him again, biting her lip. She seemed less sure of herself. The look on her face was one of dread.

"Get back under cover," Placido Geist told her.

Billy rode up and got down off his horse. He was carrying his .32 lever-action, the big Sharps in the saddle scabbard. He was pleased with himself. "Got the last of them," he said.

The old bounty hunter had stationed himself in the doorway. "All but one," he said.

"He still inside?" Billy asked, puzzled.

"I wouldn't turn my back on him," Placido Geist said.

Billy squinted at him, less than jovial now, as he read Placido Geist's meaning, but he kept the carbine pointed down at his feet and made no move to raise it.

"You in on it from the first, Billy?" Placido Geist asked him. "Or was it simply an opportunity, something that presented itself?" The .44 Smith was in his waistband, but he had his hands clasped behind his back. "I'm only wondering whether you were meant to kill me in my sleep."

"I never intended to hurt anybody," Billy said.

"You knew where the money was, stitched in my saddle. What gave you second thoughts?"

"Jacob Nighthorse swings a lot of weight," Billy said. "It could have swung my way, I did this right."

"Not if he knew you were scratching his daughter."

Billy's eyes were pinched and wary. His breath came short. "Don't go down that road," he said tightly.

Placido Geist saw he was dangerously close to the edge. "I didn't go down that road, Billy," he said.

"I didn't think they'd mutilate her," Billy said.

"What difference does it make? You don't want her to be brought back alive and tell her father about you. You came along to make sure she died."

"There was no need for her to suffer."

"You threw in with scoundrels and scum. You wanted the money, and you wanted the girl dead, and you wanted Nighthorse in your debt. You've lost on all three counts. You took the devil's coin and killed a better man out there on the hardpan. There's no backing down from it now."

"I meant no injury," Billy said obstinately.

"You're a black liar, Billy Dollar," Placido Geist said. "You're a coward and a thief who broke faith with a child, and you're holding a dead man's hand. Aces and eights."

Billy swung the Winchester up, thumbing back the hammer as the barrel came level. Placido Geist brought the .45 Colt Sheriff's Model out from behind his back and shot Billy twice in the chest with it, slip-hammering the single-action. Billy sat down heavily on the ground, the wind knocked out of him. He seemed disappointed, both in himself and the way things had turned out. He looked up at Placido Geist with a puzzled expression. "I didn't mean for things to get this far," he complained. "I never thought I'd have to use you for an alibi."

"You told me you didn't need one," Placido Geist said.

"I needed more than that," Billy said. His eyes glazed over and his sagging body slackened, toppling sideways. He was dead.

Placido Geist had seen a great deal of death, but he felt an unaccountable loss. He turned away and went inside the adobe to find the girl.

She'd made no effort to hide herself, but stood just behind the door, trembling slightly, her eyes cast down.

"He's past hurting you," Placido Geist told her.

"Uncle Billy was a bad man," Jennie said, looking up at him with a child's grave conviction.

"He did some bad things," Placido Geist agreed.

"But my father trusted him," she protested.

"Men you can trust are in short supply," Placido Geist said.

"My father's better off now," she said, her voice firmer.

Placido Geist thought back to the last time he'd seen Jacob Nighthorse, outside his grand, empty house on the edge of the prairie. Placido Geist had looked back, but Nighthorse had made no gesture of farewell. He stood rigid and solitary by the wind-blown hedge, frozen against the unforgiving skyline like a dead tree with withered branches. Whatever he might have known, Nighthorse knew he'd failed to keep a promise.

"The man with the scarred face, he wasn't a bad man."

"No worse than most," Placido Geist told her.

"He tried to be kind to me," she said.

"A man is as a man does," he remarked, and when he said it, he heard an echo. Cicatriz had told him exactly that.

There is no such thing as love, Placido Geist supposed. There are only proofs of love. He went out to his horse and got a spade to dig the graves. ➤

Solution to the November "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

A. Greenhorn

B. Unearthly

C. Yummy

D. Motion

E. Officiate

F. New Jersey

G. Watches

H. Hatchet

I. Yearly

J. Dimple

K. Ostriches

L. Wettest

M. Elizabeth

N. Rampage

O. Effort

P. Arizona

Q. Demote

R. Traffic

S. Hopeless

T. Itchy

U. Stammer

V. Settle

W. Thatcher

X. Upholstery

Y. Fathom

Z. Feather

QUOTATION

Author—(E. T.) Guymon, (Jr.)

Work—"WHY DO WE READ THIS STUFF?" from *The Mystery Story*, edited by John Ball

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Photo by Willie Rose

Bones of Contention

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 139.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

EDWARD D. HOCH

WALK WITH A WIZARD

Tommy heard the news on Monday morning, in the pool room on the corner of Fourth and Avery. He heard it from a wrinkled little man named Fuzzy whose main occupation was the daily distribution of racing forms to a dozen or so neighborhood spots.

"Wiz is back," Fuzzy said, speaking around the damp toothpick held loosely between his lips. "I saw him this morning."

Tommy looked up from the pool table, letting the cue glance off one of the balls. "Wiz Jacobs? Back here?" It was hard to believe. With anyone but Wiz it would have been impossible to believe. "Where is he?"

Fuzzy shrugged and kept on counting out the two dozen racing forms that were the pool room's daily allotment. "Around."

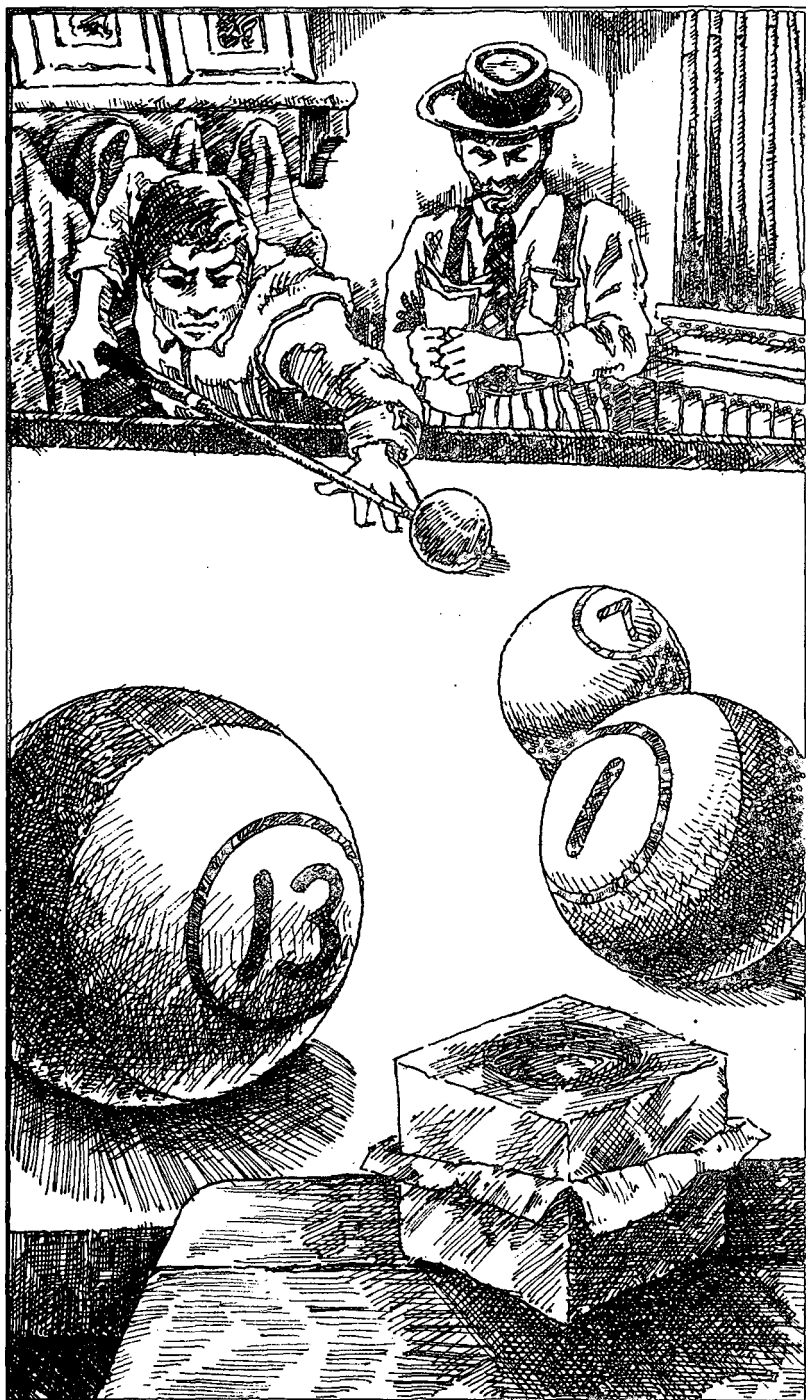
"He don't have to worry. Them cops'll never put him away."

"It's the federal boys that're after him," Fuzzy said in the familiar awed tones of the petty criminal. "They don't fool."

"That don't bother Wiz," Tommy said, feeling that he must defend this man he'd never met. "Two years ago they had him right down at headquarters and they couldn't hold him."

Wiz was short for Wizard. He was merely a small-time hood, but he'd earned the nickname with some of the most audacious escapes ever attempted. A few years earlier, brought in as a suspect in a midtown diamond robbery, he'd jumped through a plate glass window on the second floor of police headquarters, landed on the soft convertible top of a car parked below, and took off running before the first shot bounced uselessly off the pavement ten feet behind him.

At thirty-one, Wiz Jacobs was a hunted man, as he had been for all of his adult life. At the age of eighteen he'd served his only prison term, for auto theft, and come out of jail seasoned



Meredith Lightbown

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in the ways of crime. Armed robbery, especially jewel robbery, had been his specialty of late, and it was known that the police suspected him in the robbery slaying of a jewelry salesman on Long Island the previous year. Tommy had seen the F.B.I. circular on the Post Office bulletin board just last week. *Unlawful flight to avoid prosecution*, it said, and that made Wiz Jacobs a federal case.

In the neighborhood, Wiz had long ago become the hero of every kid old enough to carry a switchblade. To them he was King Arthur and Superman and Babe Ruth all rolled into one, and Tommy Egan was no exception. On winter nights when it was too cold to run with the gang or roll bums in an alley or pick up high school girls on Avery Street, they'd sit around and talk about the latest exploit—rumored or factual—of Wiz Jacobs.

"Remember when Wiz still led the gang? Remember the weekly rumbles over in Wright Park? Remember . . . ?" And so it went. Wiz was the neighborhood boy who'd made good, the local hero in a world where Post Office pictures meant more than Wall Street winnings. As long as he was able to outwit the police with seeming ease, Wiz Jacobs was a bigger man to the neighborhood than the President of the United States.

Now, when Tommy heard that Wiz was back in the old neighborhood, he hurried home through streets damp with morning rain, occasionally shielding his eyes against the sun as it broke between the clouds. Up the worn steps to the fifth floor apartment overlooking the backyard mudhole, throwing on his very best clothes and making certain the never-used switchblade was nestled in his pocket. Hurrying, knowing somehow he must find and see his hero.

"No school today, Tommy?" his mother called out from the bedroom, not really caring.

"Not today," he answered, and was gone. He could have told her Wiz Jacobs quit school at the age of fifteen, and here he was at sixteen still going most days.

In the street he spotted Fuzzy just coming out of the corner drugstore with his depleted load of racing forms. "Fuzzy! Wait a minute!"

"What you want, kid?"

"Where'd you say Wiz was?"

"Didn't say. Just said I saw him."

"Where? Tell me where."

"So you can go runnin' to the cops? That what you got all dressed up for?"

"I just want to see him. Honest." He showed Fuzzy the bone handle of the switchblade. "Tell me!"

Fuzzy let his gaze drift over the weapon. He thought about it a moment longer, then motioned for Tommy to follow him. "Keep quiet about this. All you get's a look."

They made their way down the damp street, pausing finally before an alley that led between two tenements. Fuzzy pointed a crooked finger and said, "He's across the street. He'll be coming out soon, probably." Then he was gone, leaving Tommy alone in the shadows.

The three-story house across the street was well known in the neighborhood. He'd been in the fifth grade at St. Charles School when someone had first whispered into his ear about it, and he still vividly remembered the time he and Cart Edwards had crept up the rusty rear fire escape to peek through a crack in one of the painted windows. Cart had always claimed he saw a woman in the room, but when Tommy looked he could see nothing but a table with an ugly jade statue staring out at him.

Now, waiting in the shadows for Wiz Jacobs to appear, he remembered these things. Had Wiz come back to the old neighborhood to see a girl?

Presently—it might have been an hour for all he knew—the door across the street opened a crack and a woman poked her bleached head out. She glanced in both directions and then held the door wide. Wiz Jacobs stepped out.

He was, in the flesh, the glistening giant of all Tommy's dreams. He strode down the steps unconcerned, as if all the city were his to conquer. His face was handsome, still youthful, and with just the right touch of hardness about his dark features. As he turned and headed up the street, Tommy could restrain himself no longer. The promise to Fuzzy forgotten, he started off after Wiz Jacobs, running easily but with a steady pace that quickly closed the gap between them.

When only twenty feet separated them, Wiz whirled quickly, going into a crouch he must have used many times before. One hand was already inside his coat. "What you want, kid?"

"You're Wiz, aren't you?"

"What's it to you, huh?" He relaxed and brought his hand back into view.

"Nothing. I heard a lot about you, that's all."

"This your neighborhood?"

Tommy nodded, falling into step beside his hero. "I live over a couple of blocks near Avery."

"Good neighborhood," Wiz said. "I know it like the palm of my hand."

"You gonna stay around the old neighborhood a while, Wiz?"

"Guys like me gotta keep moving, kid. I just stopped by to see an old friend." Wiz looked sideways at him. "Say, you sure you're not a midget cop or something?"

This hurt Tommy, who was as tall as any of the kids in the gang. "No, Wiz. I just always heard about you and I wanted to meet you, that's all. I wanna be like you someday."

"Yeah?" Wiz Jacobs seemed pleased. He kicked at an empty beer can in their path, sending it spinning with a clatter to the opposite gutter.

"How did you get started in the rackets, Wiz?"

He chuckled a bit and looked down to make certain Tommy was serious. "How? On my eighteenth birthday a guy dared me to steal a car. It was an old junker I wouldn't have taken as a gift, but this guy was daring me. The cops stopped me before I'd driven a block."

"You never stole anything till you were eighteen?"

"Nothing big. Bicycles, candy once in a while. But nothing big. Hell, if I'd been a banker's son or something I'd have gotten a slap on the wrist for a first offense. But my folks didn't give a damn and I got six months. Jail was like a college education for me. We spent our recreation periods comparing techniques for armed robbery, mugging, auto theft, anything you could think of. I learned a lot."

"So could I," Tommy said, fingering the switchblade in his pocket.

"It's not a good life. It's a stinking, ugly life most of the time. But you get so you almost have to keep going in self-defense. I got no friends any more."

"Did you ever kill anyone, Wiz? That jewelry salesman?"

"When you reach my age, kid, you don't even ask yourself that question. Sometimes there's a guy in the way, a guy who thinks he's brave. You burn him and keep going, and you never look in the morning papers to see if he died."

They were walking past stores now, along the fringes of the neighborhood they both knew so well. Tommy wondered if he would ever come back to it like Wiz had. "I wonder if I could kill a man," he said, more to himself than to Wiz.

"Sure you could. You could kill your own mother if your life depended on it. Believe me, it's the only way to get anywhere in this messed-up world. Nobody's your friend."

"Wiz?"

"Yeah, kid?"

Tommy took a cigarette from the crumpled pack he'd stolen the week before and made a great show of lighting it. "Wiz, would you take me with you when you go?"

"What? What you talkin' about, kid?"

"I want to go with you. We could make a great team, Wiz. We could have the cops running in circles."

"I do better alone."

"Honest, Wiz, we'd be terrific together! I know a lot of new tricks you probably never heard of—things I picked up with the gang."

"Things I was doin' before you were born!"

Wiz was walking faster now, and Tommy had to hurry to keep abreast of the long legs. "No, honest! Times change. New cars, new locks, new alarms—I know them all."

"Kid stuff."

"Take me with you, just once, on a real job. Let me handle a gun. I'll show you if it's kid stuff."

"You think I could keep my reputation if I had to be watching after a kid all the time?"

"I'm fast, Wiz. Fast and slippery."

Wizard sighed and lit a cigarette himself. "Tell you what I'll do, kid, I got a car stashed not too far from here. We'll take a ride out of town and pick out a gas station. You can show me how good you are."

"Gosh, Wiz! Honest?" That was all he could say. It was the dream he'd harbored all these months, years. And now it was coming true!

A car had been coming slowly along the curb behind them. Tommy started to say something to Wiz, but ahead of them two men stepped from a doorway to block their path. They were tall, handsome men who might have sold insurance or real estate. They didn't look like cops to Tommy.

"Hold it right there, Wiz," one of them said, flashing something golden in the morning sun, golden like a warrior's shield. "F.B.I. You're under arrest."

The other man already had his gun out, and the car at the curb was blocking any escape in that direction, but Wiz Jacobs reacted with the speed that had earned him his reputation. His left arm shot around Tommy's throat, pulling him off balance while his right was already yanking at his own weapon.

"Out of my way, or the kid gets it! Right through the head!"

"Wiz!" Tommy gasped out, feeling the cold barrel of a gun against his temple.

"You can't make it this time, Wiz," the man with the gun said. "The neighborhood's against you now. Your girl's turned you in."

"Drop your guns or the kid gets it," Wiz snarled. "I'm not fooling."

"Wiz, Wiz—I'm your friend! Don't do it!" He heard a click as Wiz Jacobs cocked his gun. He knew suddenly that death was only seconds away.

His hand was still on the switchblade in his pocket. He touched the button that sprang it into life. Then, in the same motion, he plunged it back through the cloth of his coat, feeling it connect with Wiz's body.

The grip on his throat relaxed for an instant, and in that instant Tommy squirmed free. Two of the F.B.I. agents fired at the same moment, and Wiz Jacobs staggered backward, already dead on his feet.

"Big man," one of them said, turning over the crumpled body with the toe of his shoe. "That was fast thinking, son."

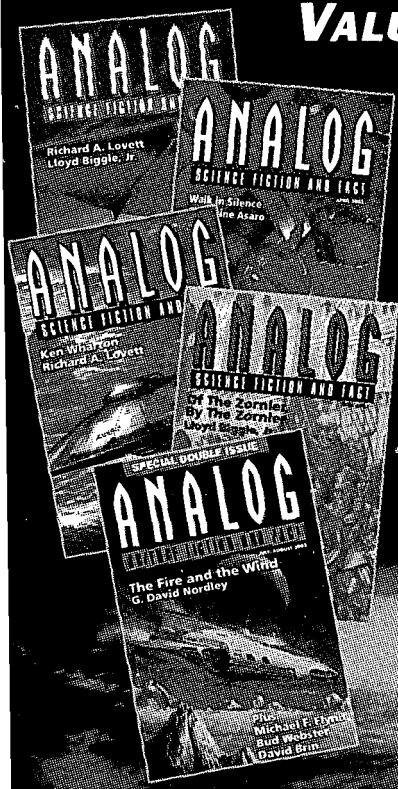
Tommy didn't even hear him. He was leaning against the faded brick of the building, crying for the first time in years. Crying for all the dead heroes. ♫

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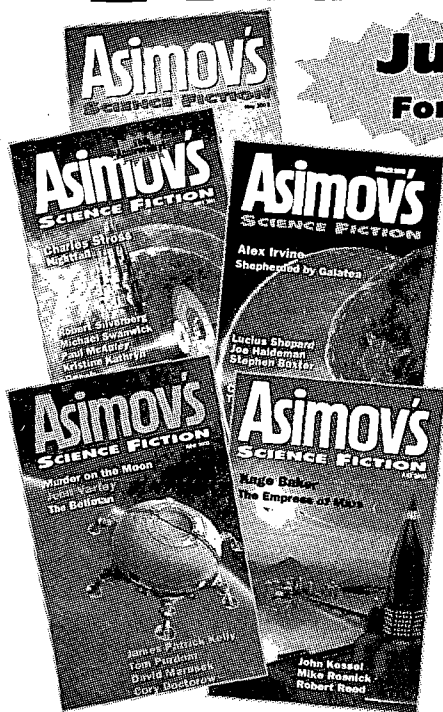
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THE STORY THAT WON

The June Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Jane Hinckley of New Bern, NC. Honorable mentions go to Jeff Gibson of San Jose, CA; Marcia Mascolini of Portage, MI; Pierce Askegren of Annandale, VA; Richard N. Brush of Bellevue, MI; Ruth Ketvirtis of Midpines, CA; Keith Craig of Rancho Santa Margarita, CA; Pat Scannell of Framingham, MA; Ray Chabot of Waterdown, Ontario, Canada; and Beth and Craig Fisher of Ft. Collins, CO.



PREQUEL JANE HINCKLEY

“They must be eliminated!” the Big Man cried. “They have betrayed the True Blue 42!”

“Yes, Great One,” replied the Head Underling.

“Our information gatherers know,” continued the Big Man, “they must never breathe a word about our top-secret activities to outsiders. Yet of these three rookies—” He tossed photo ID’s on the desk. “—one told his mother, one told his wife, and one told his psychiatrist. Remember our credo . . . DIF.”

“Yes, Great One. ‘Disobedience is fatal.’ How shall the elimination proceed?”

“At present all three are in the infirmary with common colds. They will be retested and the results will, of course, be positive for strep throat. They will be offered an ‘antibiotic’ to ‘heal’ them. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Great One . . . poison.”

“Fine. I will leave the details to you.”

The poor rookies were commanded to line up and gargle until told to stop. They died in seconds.

Unfortunately, the bogus medical reports turned out to be true. The throat disease spread like wildfire throughout the organization. That’s how the True Blue 42 changed its name to the 39 Streps.

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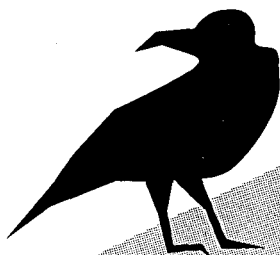
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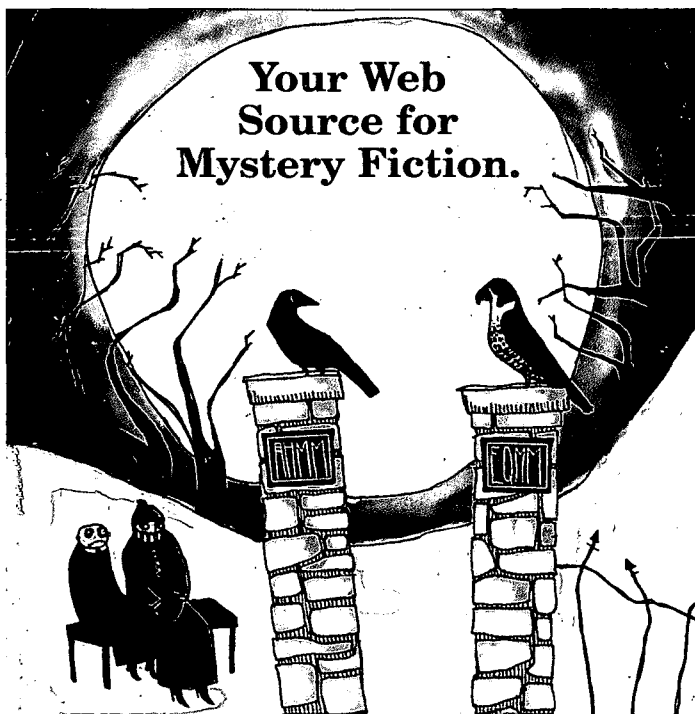
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